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OR, The Wipe-Out at White Water.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,
AUTHOR OF "VIOLET VANE" SERIES, "DAISY
DARE," "OLD BOMBSHELL," "WILD VUL-
CAN," "THE DIAMOND SPORT," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE RISE OF WHITE WATER CITY.

THE rude cabin stood near the foot of the rapid where the mountain stream was churned into a white foam by the jagged rocks which here and there thrust their ugly, misshapen heads above the surface. It was a strange and lonely spot for a home there, in that picturesque pocket—shut in, as it seemed, from the rest of the world by the majestic mountains which towered on every hand.

THE DOOR SWUNG OPEN AND CAPTAIN MUTE STEPPED IN. HE CARRIED IN HIS ARMS
THE KIDNAPPED CHILD.

The sun had dropped far down behind the western peaks and the dusky twilight of an early summer night was gathering in the mountain pocket.

In the open cabin doorway stood a beautiful but rather sad-faced young woman, who was scarcely more than a girl. She was anxiously watching the narrow pass which served as the only entrance and exit to the lonely valley.

"I wonder why he does not come?" she murmured, the anxious look deepening in her blue eyes. "He should have been here by midday. I trust nothing has happened to him. If there has—if he never returns—Heavenly Father! what would become of me?"

The terrible thought caused her face to turn white as snow, and she felt so faint and weak she was compelled to cling to the side of the doorway for support.

The shadows grew thicker and deeper amid the rocks; the only sound that broke the stillness was the sullen and continuous roar of the rapids. How dreary and desolate it was! The utter solitude and loneliness of the place sunk like a heavy weight upon the woman's heart. She felt as if she were entombed there—buried from all the world.

"But with him I can endure it!" she exclaimed. "With him this place is home—this is our little Paradise! Oh, Frank, my husband! how I love you!—love you with my soul, my body, my entire being! You are everything to me! With you I am happy, although I cannot forget your hands are stained with his blood. If I could only banish that haunting memory! I have tried to forget, but it is impossible. But, why should I think of that now of all times? It makes me shiver."

She drew back a little within the doorway, and added:

"Those shadows gathering so blackly away out there seem like evil demons. I dare not remain here longer. I will close the door and place a light in the window, so he will know I am expecting him."

She drew back into the cabin and fastened the door; then she lighted a lamp and placed it so its beams would shine from a small window into the darkness. With a nervous step, she paced the floor, pausing now and then to listen eagerly, fearfully, her hands pressed to her breast to still the beating of her heart. As the moments passed, she became more and more agitated.

The room was quite comfortably, though rudely furnished. Everywhere were the undefinable indications of a woman's touch and a woman's presence.

At length the waiting woman heard a distant sound. With clasped hands, she listened.

Through the dusk of evening came the hoof-beats of a horse. Nearer—nearer—nearer!

"He is coming! he is coming! he is coming!"

She almost shrieked the words in her joyous excitement. Through the dusk of evening came the musical hail of a manly voice. With a cry of delight, she hurried forward and threw open the door.

"Frank! Frank! Frank!"

The horse was at the door. The man leaped down and caught her in his arms, covering her face with kisses.

"Why, what is the matter, little wife?" he asked. "You are all atremble! What makes you shake so?"

She only clung to him the closer and hid her face on his breast, beginning to sob. He lifted her gently in his strong arms and carried her in to the cabin.

"What is the matter, Ione?" he repeated. "You are in a dreadful state. It is too bad for you to get worked up so now. Tell me the cause."

"I did not know—I had—Oh, Frank! I feared something dreadful had happened to you! You were so late!"

"Is that it?" a strange look darkening his handsome face. "Well, I had cause to be late. I was followed."

"Followed?" she echoed, in a gasp. "Oh, Frank!"

"Yes, I have been followed from Bowie Bar. I did my best to give my trailers the slip, but it was useless."

"Who followed you? Why did they do so?"

"I was obliged to dispose of some of my dust and nuggets to obtain provisions. It was seen by some idle miners, and, very naturally, their curiosity was aroused, but their questioning failed to elicit any information from me. I knew well enough they would follow me, and I did my best to lead them astray. That is why I did not reach home at midday. I have spent several good hours in trying to deceive them."

"And failed?"

"Yes."

She arose from the chair where he had placed her and clasped both his hands.

"You have come back safe to me, my husband, and I am happy."

He smiled and drew her close; but the smile was quickly replaced by a frown.

"I am afraid you do not understand just what it means for this pocket to be discovered," he said. "A rush is sure to follow, and almost before you realize it, there will be a mining-town right here in our secluded retreat. You can imagine what kind of a place this quiet pocket will become."

"I know. It is true I have hoped to live here for years, hidden from the rest of the world; but, what is to be will be. If the men must come and build a town, let them come. I will not fear, for you will protect me."

"With my life!" he declared, gazing fondly into her blue eyes.

Two months later.

A wonderful change had taken place in the little mountain pocket. Instead of one cabin standing beside the roaring stream, there were nearly twenty buildings of various descriptions, and more were going up, the sounds of hammer and saw awaking hundreds of echoes. Besides these more substantial erections, there were numerous dirty canvas tents.

From the rapid, the place had taken the name of White Water City. One of the buildings was a combined hotel and gaming saloon, and a stage line had been established, over which semi-weekly connections with Bowie Bar were made.

It was a placer town, and most of the claims were located near the quiet water below the rapid, which still surged and roared and foamed over the grisly rocks. With pan and rocker and sluice, half a hundred men were trying to wash a fortune from the mud of the stream and its vicinity.

The original discoverer of the place was known as Frank Stillman, and he held two claims, the extra one being by right of discovery. The miners knew he was married, but the fact that only one or two of their number had caught glimpses of his wife filled them with wonder and convinced them there was some mystery about the couple. One old fortune-seeker observed that Stillman was properly named, for he was a *still man* in truth.

Those who had seen Stillman's wife declared she was "a stunner," which made those who had not been thus fortunate eager to get a glimpse. But Mrs. Stillman seemed determined to avoid observation.

Everything did not move smoothly in White Water City. There were two factions, each hostile to the other. One was led by a dark-faced desperado known as Black Burk, and, as he openly avowed a special dislike for Frank Stillman, Stillman was looked upon as the leader of the other party. Burk had made one or two unsuccessful attempts to oust Stillman and his friends from their claims and drive them from the pocket, and although the desperate man had failed, he still growled and threatened.

"We're goin' ter hev er reglar hot ole time with thet p'isen critter yit," observed one of the old men, soberly. "Either he an' his gang hes got ter git out of this town ur ther honest men will hev ter—you hear me!"

The old fellow was right. With increasing envy and uneasiness, Black Burk observed the influx of miners to White Water. He had planned a blow that should give himself and his pals the valuable property of the pocket, and he saw his stroke would be useless if he delayed longer, so he quietly mustered his men.

But the other faction had been quietly watching the dark-faced rascal all the while, and before he could quite gather his supporters for the grand coup, they were all amazed to receive notice that if they did not leave the valley within an hour they would be forcibly ejected or hung.

Things culminated rapidly, and the result was something like a battle, in which Black Burk and his men were worsted and driven out of White Water. But, as the desperado and his satellites retreated through the gap, Burk called down curses on the town and declared his enemies had not seen the last of him.

"I will yet prove a scourge to this place!" he shouted, turning to shake his clinched hand at those who were watching his departure. "I am not the man to be run out of a town and never return! I promise you that you shall hear from Black Burk again."

And they did.

The citizens of White Water had met to elect

a "mayor and city government." The meeting was held in the saloon of the Columbia Hotel, and the orators were just getting in their fine work at warming up the assembly when a red-headed miner known as Red Hot dashed in at the door and leaped upon the top of a deal-table.

"Feller-citizens of this yere galori'us city of White Water!" he shouted, waving his arms after the manner of a rooster on a fence as he flaps his wings preparatory to crowing. "Give me yer unadulterated distention fer erbout one minute an' I will declaim somethin' thet'll jest erbout knock ye bald-headed with amazement. Three days ago there wuz an addition ter ther poppylashun of this yere city thet has bin kep'er dark an' silent secret tell jest erbout now."

Instantly the attention of the meeting was centered on the red-headed man.

"What are you driving at?" demanded one.

"A secret?" cried another. "W'at is it?"

"Spit it out!"

"Let it slide!"

"You hev our ears!"

"Excuse me!" grinned the red-head. "I hev plenty 'nuff ears of my own. I hain't settin' up as no jackass. But, speakin' of thet thar addition to our poppylation, feller-citizens, it is—"

He paused, impressively.

"W'at in thunder is it?" demanded an impatient listener.

"A babby!"

"W-h-a-t?" shouted fifty voices.

"It's a babby!" repeated Red Hot, smiting his hands together in his excitement—"a gin-owine leetle teenty squawkin' babby, or I'm er howlin' liar!"

What an excitement his words created!

"Where is it?" came the cry.

"It's over ter Stillman's, b'gosh!" replied the man on the table. "An' he's ther father of it! I've jest seen it, an'—"

But the crowd waited to hear no more. There was no motion to adjourn, but every man made a break for the door. Out of the saloon they poured and made straight for Stillman's cabin. The one who reached it first rapped lightly on the door. When Frank Stillman appeared, the fellow said:

"Er-er-excuse me! We have called to see the—ah!—the—ahem!—the babby!"

Stillman looked at the crowd in consternation, then smiled, as he replied:

"I am sorry, pards, my house is too small to hold you all, so I cannot invite you in. But if you will pass the window yonder, you can have a look at the baby."

There was no hesitation. The men filed past the open window, beyond which, in an easy-chair which could be made to serve as a bed, reclined the blushing mother, with the sleeping infant on her breast. Every one of those rough fellows removed his hat and spoke in a whisper, afraid of awaking the baby. Those in front lingered and stared till pushed along by the eager ones behind. Around the corner, after taking a look, the men slapped each other on the back, shook hands enthusiastically, and a few even hugged some particular friend.

"Ther footure of White Water City is assured!" asserted Judge Orson Whittles.

"Wuzn't it a picter!"

"An' it's mother—she's a daisy!"

"An' Stillman—he's a triumph!"

"You bet!"

When all had taken a look, the men marched back together.

Stillman was still standing in the doorway, smiling. The throng paused, and, removing his hat, Judge Whittles said:

"Mister Stillman, you are an honor ter this yere great city of White Water. We, her representative citizens, are proud of you and—your wife and—and—the babby."

The crowd could restrain themselves no longer. Some one proposed three cheers; Red Hot led off, and, forgetting the sleeping infant, the men gave vent to their enthusiasm.

When Stillman had thanked them, the judge observed:

"We are now goin' back ter ther meetin', an' I reckon ther boys'll find it an easy thing ter decide who shell be may'r of this yere city."

They did. Frank Stillman was unanimously elected to the office.

CHAPTER II.

STUTTERING CHARLIE AND HAPPY HARRY.

"Oh, I am the real Charlie Ross!
My parents are mourning my loss;
If they'll give enuff pelf,
I will hunt for myself;
If not, I'll remain my own boss."

THE singer was seated on a small boulder,

idly punching the ground with a cane. His form was decidedly slender, and his clothes were a "snug fit." The suit was plainly tailor-made, the figure being a "loud" check. He wore a flashy red tie, and eyeglasses hung dangling from a cord. His patent-leather shoes were slender and pointed at the toes.

"That's splendid!" cried a merry voice. "Give us some more."

He looked around to see a pretty girl of sixteen standing a short distance away, regarding him with eyes that were brimming with laughter. In a moment he was on his feet, hat in hand, bowing politely.

"B-b-b-beg p-p-pardon," he stammered, adjusting the eyeglasses. "What d-d-did you s-s-say?"

The girl showed her white teeth in a merry laugh, as she advanced fearlessly.

"I asked you to sing some more. You do sing delightfully, but you talk awfully funny." "T-t-that's so; I can s-s-sing, b-b-but I can't talk worth a cuc-cuc-cuc-continental."

"What's the matter? Do you stutter?"

"Well, I d-d-don't tut-tut-talk this way for fuf-fuf-fuf-fuf-fun," he replied smiling.

"That's too bad," she declared, coming still closer and trying to look sober. "You won't mind because I laughed, will you? I can't help laughing at everything; that's why they call me Happy Harry."

"Oh, I d-d-don't care," was his assurance. "I am used to b-b-being laughed at. Everybody laughs at me. Is your nun-nun-name Harry? I thought you were a gug-gug-girl."

"I am."

"But Harry is a bub-bub-bub-boy's name."

"Not in my case," and she put her hands behind her and shook her curly head as she showed her teeth in a smile. "That's my name, and I'm a girl. Dick says I am an all-wool-and-a-yard-wide girl, too."

"Who is D-d-d-dick?"

"He is my bub-bub-bub-brother. Oh, say! don't you mind my mocking you! It's such jolly fun! I wish I stuttered!"

"If you d-d-did, you would wish you d-d-didn't. Say, if people call you Harry, I reckon your nun-nun-name must be Harriet."

"Oh, how did you guess that? That is right. What is your name?"

"C-c-c-Charlie Ross; but almost everybody calls me S-s-stuttering Charlie."

"I have never seen you before. I do not reckon you have been in White Water a great while."

"I came to-day."

"Are you going to stay long?"

"I don't know. It will be just as I happen to f-f-feel."

"I hope you will stay," said Harry, frankly.

"I like you."

"Well, I am g-g-glad of that," laughed Charlie. "I l-l-like you. I suppose you l-l-live with your fuf-fuf-folkes?"

She shook her head.

"No. Dick and I live all alone in that little cabin over there."

"W-w-what!" Charlie appeared astonished.

The girl laughed at his amazement.

"I suppose D-d-dick is a big fellow?" he observed.

"He is two years younger than I."

"W-w-what!" cried the stammerer again.

"I'm giving it to you straight," declared Harry.

"How do you manage to g-g-get a living?"

"Oh, we pick it up in various ways," was her evasive reply. "The people here are good to us."

Charlie regarded her closely, for it was plain she was concealing something from him. He asked her to sit down on the bowlder, but she declared she had rather stand. When he attempted to question her further about herself and her brother, she skillfully turned the conversation into another channel. They talked for some time, then she declared she must return to the cabin.

"I would ask you to come and see us," she said, with the informal freedom of one who knows nothing of drawing-room etiquette, "but, you see, Dick is not well and he has a perfect dread of strangers. If you stay in White Water, I may see you again."

She danced lightly away toward the cabin, turning once or twice to wave her hand to him. He watched her till she had disappeared, and there was a singular look upon his face.

It was impossible to tell what thoughts were passing through his mind, for he uttered no word aloud, save the single word:

"Found!"

But, that was an expression of triumph, and

there was a look of satisfaction on his face. He sat down on the bowlder and mused for a time, after which he rose and made his way to the hotel. In his room he wrote a long letter, which was directed as follows:

"MR. HORACE DANTON,

No. 314 B—Street,

Philadelphia, Pa."

After this Charlie and Harry saw each other every day. He would wait patiently for hours to get a glimpse of her, but she always rewarded him by seeing him for a minute, at least.

He often tried to get her to talk about herself and her brother, but in this his success was discouraging. Whenever he approached the subject, the smile would fade from her merry face and something akin to a look of alarm would take its place.

The men of White Water knew very little of the brother and sister. Every one liked the girl, but the boy was said to be a timid, pale-faced creature, with a strong inclination to consumption and an early grave. He was rarely seen outside the cabin.

When they came to the pocket the waifs had enough money to purchase the little hut which served them as a home. The men of the camp had taken care they did not want for provisions.

There was a story that once or twice on dark nights the form of a man had been seen to enter the cabin. Charlie endeavored to discover the person who had seen this, but no one seemed willing to assume the responsibility of the story.

It was plain a mystery of some kind hung over the strange pair. Stuttering Charlie minded not in the least the ridicule and rough jokes of the men of White Water. It seemed sure enough to every one that he had determined to solve the mystery.

CHAPTER III.

LIVING FOR VENGEANCE.

FRANK STILLMAN made a popular mayor, even though he was absolutely fearless in his way of discharging the duties of his office. It is true he was not popular among a few of the toughest characters in White Water, but the number was small and none of them ventured to openly express their dislike of him.

Had he been properly supported, Frank would have closed the saloons of the place to a certain extent, for, small though the town was, it had more than one saloon. But even Judge Whittles, who was one of the young mayor's fastest friends, indulged freely in the glass that inebriates, and was against closing the liquor places.

On the further side of the stream from the town, a narrow road of nature's making led along the face of the perpendicular bluff that dropped down to the water's edge. This road led upward till it finally reached the open mountain country some miles away.

The mayor pointed out this road to the citizens and easily convinced them it would be of vast importance in entering and leaving the pocket if it could be easily reached. As it was, there was but one entrance to the pocket, and that was anything but a satisfactory one.

"But how are you goin' ter git over thar?" asked Judge Orson Whittles. "This yere stream hain't goin' ter be swum hyer, an' that's facts. It'd be suicide ter try it, fer the water'd kerry a pusson down onder them thar rocks and them thar rocks would nacherly chaw him up, hide, ha'r an' boots. I'll 'low I dunno of ar'y way of puttin' that road ter use."

"It will be difficult," admitted Frank; "but it can be done."

"How?"

"By building a bridge."

"By buildin' a bridge!" echoed the judge. "Great Hannah! how are you goin' ter git a bridge across hyer?"

"Throw it across."

"Danged if you hain't gone plum' crazy! You may have quite a muskil, young man, but you can't do that! That'd knock George Washington's throwin' feat higher'n ther Long-handled Dipper!"

"But if the town will give me its support, I will guarantee to do it."

"Blamed ef you shan't hev ther support of ther town, even if you do want ter make a tarnation fool of yourself! But, I can't git it through my old noddle how you're goin' ter work ther racket."

"Do you see those rocks there that rise so high above the surface of the stream?"

"Yep."

"Well, their heads were above water during the spring freshet. I will admit they did not

rise very high above it then, but with slight additions, they will serve as supports for the bridge and will keep the structure above any flood that does not overflow the entire valley."

"Um!" grunted the judge. "Well, go ahead with your bridge-makin'. I'll stand abind ye."

It did not prove to be a very difficult thing to obtain the support of the town, and in a short time the bridge was being built under Frank's directions. It turned out to be a less difficult thing than he had expected and was a pronounced success. A small amount of work on the road made it a practical one for travel either afoot or mounted, and a still greater amount of work would have made it a fair stage-road. But, that was not necessary at that time.

This piece of work gave the citizens of White Water still greater confidence in their new mayor.

Frank's home life was of the most beautiful character. With his wife and child he was perfectly happy, and since the birth of the little son the sad look had vanished from Ione's face. The baby had given her something over which to occupy her mind and thus had aided her to forget the unpleasant past.

The child had been given its father's name, and, with little Frank in her arms, the happy mother watched for her husband's home-coming at noon and night. He had come to always look for her at the door, where she and the baby would claim his kisses.

One night he was filled with amazement and not a little alarm when he saw she was not waiting for him in her usual place.

"What can it mean?" he exclaimed, as he hurried forward. "Can anything have happened?"

The door was standing open, and before he entered he heard the baby crying.

"Must be sick," he thought.

But he found the child lying unattended in its crib. Prone in the center of the floor, face downward, lay its mother!

"My God—Ione!" he cried, leaping toward her.

She did not stir—she lay like one who had suddenly been stricken down by the hand of death!

As he bent over her, he saw a slip of paper clasped in one white hand. There was writing on it! What did it mean?

In a moment he had read the words written upon the paper. They were:

"Philip Howard still lives—for vengeance!"

After being driven out of White Water City, Black Burk was not heard from for some time. The citizens believed they had seen the last of him, despite his threat, and he was being swiftly forgotten.

But Burk was simply making preparations to carry his threat into execution. One day he struck his first blow. Some miles out of White Water the regular stage was halted by a band of masked men and completely looted. When the leader of the masked robbers gave the stage-driver permission to go on, he also said:

"You may tell the people of White Water in general and my dear friend Frank Stillman in particular that Black Burk is still alive and has not forgotten him. I propose to take toll on this road for some time to come. Good day."

What a sensation this created in White Water! With what breathless interest did the citizens listen to the tale as told by the stage-driver, Snappy Seth!

"Hooray!" shouted one half-intoxicated fellow. "White Water's bound ter be a howlin' ole town now we've got a band of ginoowine road-agents!"

Some one promptly knocked him down!

One of the passengers pushed his way to the center of the crowd. His clothes were decidedly ragged and he had the aspect of a tramp, despite the battered silk hat of ancient style, which he wore tipped in a reckless manner upon the back of his head, a mass of wool-like hair curling out around its base. His face was perfectly destitute of beard, and his huge mouth was stretched in a grin that made his countenance resemble a full moon. In his buttonhole he wore an immense sunflower.

"I'm no Oscar Wilde," he asserted, as he reached a position beside the stage-driver; "but I'm a lulu, bet yer socks! I am called Old Sunflower, gents, at yer sarvice," removing his high hat and bowing. "I'm allus roun' whar thar's any fun or any fodder that needs eatin' afore it spiles. I'm a sport. Jest at present I'm a trifle down onder my luck; but wait a bit an' you'll see me whoopin' her round this yere camp in broadcloth and fine feathers."

"But this hain't presactly w'at I started in ter ossiferate. I jest kem in with ther stage. W'en ther gents o' ther concealed phizogs axed me would I shell out, I turned my pockets wrong side to the weather with the greatest of pleasure. Thar wuzn't a blamed thing in 'em. You see ther gentle highwaymen did not make a fortune off me. Then perchance you will ask w'at in thunder an' soft-soap is chawin' me. I'll tell ye: My dignity's insulted—I am mad—I am so durned mad that my ha'r has took an extra cur! an' threatens ter pull itself out by ther roots! I feel like singing ther ole college song w'at we uster sing at Yale. P'raps some o' you fellers think I never went to college? I kin lick ther man as durst say so! Ther song I wuz speakin' of runs like this:

"I feel like hel—
I feel like hel—

I feel like helping some poor sinning soul."

"It is a gem o' ther fu'st watter, an' don't ye fergit it! At Yale we uster yowl it arter we hed bin licked at football or suthin' o' thet sort.

"But ter return ter our road-agents: If I only hed jest one little man hyer in this yere town, I'd take him an' go out an' clean out ther hull measly gang o' lan' pirates. Thet man's name is Violet Vane, an' he's one o' ther boys, an' don't ye fergit thet. I don't reckon he is roun' this town, is he? I'm kinder lookin' fer him."

Frank Stillman had been paying very little attention to the loud words of the tramp, but at the sound of Violet Vane's name the mayor started and turned very white. Whirling, he stared hard at the man who had called himself Old Sunflower, then he hastily left the group.

"I wonder if that old tramp will know me?" he muttered, as he walked slowly toward his home. "He saw me when I had been connected with Captain Marvel, and if he recognizes me and blows, it will be pretty sure to ruin me in this town. I almost believe luck is turning against me!"

A desperate light filled his eyes and his lips were pressed tightly together. He had the air of a man nearly driven at bay.

"My beard may serve to disguise me from his eyes," he said. "But he must not see lone. Poor girl! She has been in a terrible state ever since that infernal slip of paper fell into her hand! She is so nervous she fears to have me leave her a moment; but I have to leave her at times.

"That paper was a cowardly hoax, for I know Violet Vane is dead. We met man to man, and he fel before my revolver with a bullet in his brain. It was his life or mine, but I did not want to kill him. He forced me into it. What could I do? But I do not like to think of that—I would to God I might forget the five years of my life previous to coming to this pocket!"

But it is not so easy to forget.

The citizens of White Water were aroused to quite a high pitch of excitement by Black Burk's daring robbery, and a thousand plans were proposed and abandoned, but in the end a reward of five hundred dollars was offered for the capture of the road-agent chief.

For two or three trips the stage was unmolested, and some of the more foolish citizens were beginning to chuckle over the belief that Burk had been frightened away by the offer of a reward, when the stage came in one night with a strange driver handling the ribbons. Snappy Seth sat beside the stranger, his coat-sleeve cut away above the elbow of his right arm, which was wrapped in blood-soaked cloths.

The crowd that was awaiting the arrival of the stage knew something had happened.

The strange driver whirled the "hearse" to a standstill in front of the Columbia Hotel with a skill equal to that of Snappy himself. Then he leaped lightly down and swung open the door for the passengers to alight.

"Feller people of White Water," cried the wounded driver, standing up and waving his uninjured arm, "Black Burk tried ter hold us up ter-day, and he got sweetly left—"

His words were checked by a cheer from the throng.

"Hooraw fer Snappy!" bellowed the red-headed fellow known as Red Hot. "He's a royal Jim-dandy, an' don't ye fergit ter mark thet down!"

"I can take very little of ther honor ter myself," asserted the driver. "I done ther best I could—"

"We know ye did."

"Thet wuz well enough!"

"Ter tell ther honest truth," continued Snappy Seth, "I never thought of tryin' ter slide through Black Burk's gang tell it wuz proposed ter me by ther gent as sot on ther seat be-

side me. He said ef I'd handle ther ribbons, he'd do ther shootin'!"

"Bully fer him!"

"He's ther right kind!"

"W'en he said that an' showed thet he meant business, I reckoned I'd try ther racket jest fer ther excitement o' ther thing. He got out his guns an' made shore they wuz in good workin' order. In Echo Gap we kem onter ther hull gang of agents. Burk shouted fer us ter hold up. Then we commenced business. I let ther critters hev ther whip an' howled fer all I wuz wu'th. Ther leetle stranger thar riz right up in meetin' with a gun in each han', an' w'en he commenced ter shoot suthin' begun ter drop, you bet your life! He picked off three or four of ther agents, an' ther ole he'rse wuz jumpin' an' rockin' ter kill all ther time. It wuz fun!"

"Jest as we wuz breakin' through ther line, I got a bit of lead in my arm thet completely knocked it out of duty. Then I thought we wuz done fer. But we wuzn't! Thet leetle cuss jest caught ther ribbons an' whip, an' ther speed he got out of them animiles knocks my record clean out of sight. We got erway, but we never could ef it hadn't bin fer him. He's ther best leetle all-round man I ever set eyes on—you hear me!"

The crowd cheered again more heartily than before. The tastily-attired stranger, who wore a silk hat and a buttonhole bouquet of fresh violets, found himself the center of attention.

The ragged tramp who called himself Old Sunflower forced his way through the crowd. When his eye fell on the little man, he fairly yelled:

"Blow me blind! May I be strangled to death with bug-juice ef it hain't thet little Jodandy o' creation, Violet Vane!"

From the outside of the circle Frank Stillman staggered away, looking as if he had seen an apparition.

"My God!" he gasped. "Is it possible the dead has returned to life?"

CHAPTER IV.

STUTTERING CHARLIE SHOWS HIS STUFF.

AS Violet Vane entered the saloon of the Columbia Hotel that evening the squeaking of a fiddle, shuffling of feet, coarse shouts of laughter and an occasional pistol-shot fell on his ears.

"Spot it down, long-legs!"

"Shake them feet a little faster!"

"Stir up the dust, tenderfoot!"

"Come, come; you are goin' to sleep!"

The cries came from the crowd gathered at the further end of the room. In the center of a wide circle Vane saw a slender and rather foppishly-dressed young man, who was dancing at a lively rate to the music of the old fiddle. A glance convinced the wearer of the violets that the dancer was a tenderfoot who had fallen into company that seemed to be leading him a fast life.

It was Stuttering Charlie Ross, and he had the aspect of a person who would consider it good fortune if he were dead and buried in a comfortable manner. His eyeglasses were dangling and flopping at the end of the cord, and his violent exertions had caused his cuffs to slide far down over his hands. He was perspiring from every pore, and there was a look of utter terror and despair on his face. For all of that, he was really doing some clever steps, and now and then the spectators would break forth in involuntary applause.

Within the circle stood two short, stocky toughs of the most repulsive type, each holding a cocked revolver and now and then sending a bullet into the floor in the vicinity of Charlie's flying feet. They appeared to be the ring-masters of the occasion, and in fact, they were two of the most vicious men in White Water since the ejection of Black Burk and his gang. They were know as Stub Smith and Humpy Dick, the former having but the stub of a left hand and the latter being deformed by an unsightly hump between his shoulders. For all of their deformities, they were desperate fighters and greatly feared in the camp.

"S-s-say!" cried Charlie, relaxing his pace a bit; "hain't you fellows got abub-bub-bub-about enough of this?"

In reply, Stub Smith fired a bullet into the floor so close to the stammerer's toes that he leaped three feet into the air, uttering a yell that made the spectators roar with merriment.

"Dud—dud—don't do that!" he cried.

"Then keep on shufflin'!" commanded Humpy Dick.

"Bub—bub—but I'm tired," protested Charlie. "Thet don't make er durned bit of difference ter us. Hoe in afore we shoot yer ears off!"

The unfortunate fellow went at it again.

A dark look settled on Violet Vane's face, and he did not notice the approach of Old Sunflower till that worthy touched him on the arm and said:

"Thinkin' o' takin' er han' in ther dance, leetle pard?"

"I was contemplating it," replied Vane.

"Ther tenderfut seems ter be in hot company."

"Yes. Who are those villainous-looking wretches?"

"Two o' ther wu'st galoots in this yere town, ur folks do lie 'bout 'em like sin. They are b—a—a—d men from 'Way Back, an' they're allus lookin' fer a ruction."

"Who is that boy?"

"Boy!—he ain't no boy! I 'low he looks like one, but he's er durned sight older'n he seems, ur I don't know merself w'en I looks in er mirror! He says his name is Charlie Ross, an' he bites ther biggest part o' his words inter erbout a dozen pieces. His jaws seem took with ther ague w'en he goes fer ter talk."

"Well," said Vane, quietly, advancing toward the group, "I believe I will chip into that game."

"An' by ther great jehocus! I'll stan' ter yer back ter ther bitter eend, as I has did menny an' menny a time afore this."

But before the little sport could take a hand something happened—something unexpected and startling.

In his dancing, Charlie had managed to work his way close to Stub Smith. Then he began to cut some very queer figures, flinging his arms and legs about in the wildest manner.

"Look out, you blamed fool!" roared the squat rascal, retreating to avoid being hit. "If you hit me, I'll—"

He never explained what he would do, for at that moment there was a spat as the dancer's hand struck him fairly on the left jaw with such force that he was instantly knocked off his feet and fell heavily to the floor. As he happened to have his tongue between his teeth at that moment, he came very near biting it in two.

A howl of fury came from the ruffian's lips as he scrambled to his feet and made a rush for the stammerer, who was saying, as if in the greatest alarm:

"B-b-b-beg pardon! Quite accidental, I assure you."

"Durned if I don't hev your skelp!" yelled Smith, dropping his revolver and drawing a knife.

But, Charlie succeeded in evading the rush of the desperate man, and as Smith slid past, the dancer gave him a kick that fairly lifted his feet from the floor and caused him to land on his nose, "peeling" that organ in a shocking manner.

"Whoop-ee!" squealed Old Sunflower, dancing with delight. "I'll bet a thousan' dollars ergin' a rusty ole-fashioned cent ther galoot in ther checker-board suit kin lick ther packin' outer t'other one! Who's takin' ther bet? Trot out some o' ther money men o' this yere town thet durst risk a cent ag'in' er thousan' dollars!"

But, Humpy Dick had decided to pitch in. With the greatest amazement, he witnessed the discomfiture of his pard, then he made a rush for the tenderfoot with whom they had been having so much sport.

Charlie was looking for him.

"Gug-gug-go 'way!" he cried. "If you dud-dud-don't, I shall hurt you."

Down on his hands he dropped, turning a pretty handspring and planting his feet near the pit of Humpy's stomach, rounding the deformed rascal up as if he were suddenly attacked by a terrible spasm of the colic. Then Charlie came up smilingly, just in time to upset Stub Smith, as that unworthy was struggling to his feet in a dazed manner.

The spectators were amazed. They had not dreamed the stuttering fop was made of such stuff, and they could scarcely believe the evidence of their eyes.

Violet Vane held back and watched every move keenly, a look of satisfaction on his face. He instantly comprehended the stammerer was several degrees smarter than he appeared.

"It has b-b-been a long tut-tut-time since I have found it necessary to indud-dud-dulge in a scrapping match," observed the "real Charlie Ross," spitting on his hands in a business-like manner; "bub-bub-but I believe I enjoy it pretty near as well as I ever d-d-did."

"By zucks!" whooped Old Sunflower; "thet boy's er reg'ler lar-lar!"

Humpy Dick was wheezing in a painful manner in the attempt to breathe once more in a natural way. Finally he succeeded in catching

his breath in short gasps. Then he half-straightened up, snatching out a revolver to take a snap-shot at the cause of his discomfiture. The spectators dodged to avoid a misdirected bullet, and the sharp crack of a revolver sounded, followed instantly by a cry of pain!

CHAPTER V.

DENVER DAVE "GETS LEFT."

"Ow-wow-wow! Holy hornets an' bed-bugs! Great sizzlin' Christopher! Boo-wool! Chain lightning an' electricity! Wow-wow!"

Humpy Dick was dancing and howling, while he shook his empty hand as if it had been burned.

His revolver lay on the floor—undischarged. The little sport, Violet Vane, had fired the shot!

He was on the lookout for foul play, and before Humpy could work his weapon with the intention of dropping the stammerer, the sport had fired. It was a snap shot, for he had not a second to lose, but he had noticed there was a break at the opposite side of the circle, and he knew his bullet would injure no one if he missed.

But he did not miss.

The lead flattened against the cylinder of Humpy Dick's weapon, causing the deformed wretch to drop it as if it had been red hot, and then dance and howl like an injured school-boy. The spectators looked on amazed, not understanding what had happened. But the puffs of smoke rising above Violet Vane's head told who had fired the shot. It seemed that the hunchback was hit.

An uncertain murmur came from the crowd.

"Whoop-ee!" cried Old Sunflower, delightedly. "W'at's ther matter with ye, hunchback? Been foolin' with suthin' warm, I reckon. Hand feels like ye had taken bolt o' ther business end o' er hornet, I'll bet a hoss. Hain't it funny w'en ye feel that way?"

Humpy Dick answered by a string of curious anathemas.

"Oh, say!" snickered the irrepressible tramp. "You'd best save up all them Bible words to use w'en ye say yer pra'rs. They hain't proper ter use in a permisc'us congregathering like this."

"Who fired that shot?" howled the hunchback.

"I did," replied Vane, quietly, holding his revolver ready for use in case he should suddenly need it again.

"W'at'd ye do it fer?"

"Because you were trying to shoot that fellow in the back."

"W'at business wuz that ter you?"

"The business of a man who is always determined to see fair play. It would have served you right if I had put a bullet through your treacherous heart, but I did not want the blood of such a contemptible wretch on my hands."

"You shell pay fer it!" snarled Humpy.

"I shall be pleased to square the account at any time. My motto is: Fair play forever."

"And a good motto it is," observed a strange voice, as a black-bearded man forced his way to the center of the circle. "I always stand by the man who stands by fair play. I do not know just what the row is here, but you can count me in on the side that plays a white game."

The man was a stranger in town. He was neatly dressed, and a certain air about him suggested the sport.

"I am Denver Dave," he explained, as he observed the looks of curiosity turned on him. "It may be possible some of you have heard of me? If not, it is not my fault, for I have been doing my level best to get my name up for the past three or four years. In Denver I am called the champion poker-player, and at the same time I have the reputation of being the whitest sport in Colorado. That is because I have but one motto: fair play. Whenever I hear a man calling for fair play, I can not resist the impulse to take a hand in the game. That explains why I am here."

Violet Vane eyed the man sharply, and instantly conceived a dislike for him. But, he said nothing, quietly awaiting the next move.

"What is the trouble here, anyway?" asked Denver Dave.

At this moment it was noticed that Stub Smith and Stuttering Charlie had disappeared. Humpy Dick had also picked up his revolver and was slinking away, plainly hoping to get off before he was observed departing.

"The trouble seems to be all over now," replied Vane, calmly ejecting the empty shell from

his revolver, and replacing it with a fresh cartridge.

"Just my luck," laughed the man from Denver. "I have a habit of being a bit too late. Now, I am looking for excitement. I need something to stir my blood, and I *did* hope I had made a ten-strike. I wonder if there is no way I can raise a breeze?"

"You ought ter be able ter raise a breeze," observed the sunflower tramp. "You seem ter be quite a galoot fer blowin'."

This caused a titter of laughter, and brought a scowl to the face of Denver Dave.

"Where is the individual who made that witty remark?" he demanded. "I am willing to wager he has a pair of long ears. It is a singular thing that one can always tell a jackass by his braying."

"Oh, holy jehocus!" groaned Old Sunflower, a look of sadness chasing away his habitual grin, but leaving the merry twinkle in his eyes. "Don't I wish I had kep' my yawp quiet! I am squelched fer ther present, but I'm boun' ter git square."

"If there is nothing else for excitement, I would like to scare up a little game of chip-chip," said the man from Denver, turning from the tramp and looking sharply at Violet Vane. "From the cut of your jib, I should say you sometimes handle the cards, partner?"

"Only on rare occasions," was the reply.

"Then I hope you will make this one of these occasions. I am always willing to play with a white man, and from your words which I heard a few moments ago, I judge you claim to be that."

"But I have no taste for a game to-night."

Old Sunflower groaned.

"Oh, try ther critter a whirl, Sweet Violets!" he implored. "He wants it so thunderin' bad, it's your duty ter give it ter him an' give it ter him fer all ye're wu'th. You kin wopse him, an' I know it."

Dave scowled again.

"If you do not shut down on your jaw," he said, "you may wish you had left yourself out doors."

"An' ef you go inter a game with Violets," retorted the old vagabond, promptly, "you will wish you had left yerself in Denver. But ef you git left, it will be all right."

The man from Denver made an impatient gesture and again turned to Violet Vane.

"Dare you play with me?" he demanded, in an almost insulting manner.

A slight flush mounted to the little sport's face.

"Perhaps I may dare and still not wish to."

"If you do not play, I shall certainly think you do not dare."

Vane consulted his watch.

"I can give you just an hour," he said.

The black-bearded gamester laughed grimly.

"At the end of that time that pretty time-piece will be mine," he asserted.

The wearer of the violets simply smiled, and led the way to a deal-table. The men sat down opposite each other, and the crowd gathered around, eager to witness what promised to be an interesting game. A fresh pack of cards was called for and brought on.

"Is it to be draw?" asked Vane breaking open the pack.

Denver Dave nodded.

"With what limit?"

"Limit!" exclaimed the black beard, in apparent surprise. "Do you want a limit?"

"I never play without a limit," was the calm reply.

"But what are you looking for—a boy's game?"

"You shall have all the game you desire, I promise you that. But I hold that only people of unlimited wealth should play poker without a limit—and then they are foolish. This is simply my opinion, you understand. I do not ask or expect you to agree with me. But if you play with me, the game will have a limit."

"What kind of a limit do you want?"

"I am leaving that for you to say."

"Will a thousand dollars do?"

"Yes, or five thousand. I simply want a figure of some sort."

Five thousand was finally decided on. The deal fell to Vane. Each man produced a roll of money that made the eyes of the spectators grow big, then the game began.

Old Sunflower had taken a position where he could watch the moves of both men. On his homely face there was a look of expectant delight. Evidently he anticipated sport.

For the first two or three hands neither of the men did much betting.

"If you are going to own my watch in an

hour, you will have to begin soon," smiled Vane. "I certainly shall not play more than an hour, and time has wings."

"Oh, don't you worry," protested the man from Denver, with apparent confidence. "It will not take me long to make it warm for you when things get to running."

"An' ef you play crooked, ther Old Boy'll make it warm fer you a short time afterwards," grunted Old Sunflower. "I'm watchin' both o' you fellers, an' I've got my han' on er gun thet's loaded putty derned nigh clean ter ther muzzle."

Denver Dave pretended not to hear the vagrant's words, but there was an ugly gleam in his dark eyes.

The game progressed.

"Ha, ha!" laughed the man with the black beard, as he raked in a large pot. "I am just beginning to scoop you now."

The little sport smiled.

"If you call that a scoop, your ideas must be limited," he retorted. "That is yours by rights, because you won it fairly. You are welcome to every dollar I possess if you can win it in the same way."

"Well, I shall make a strong bid for it."

But of a sudden fortune seemed to desert the Denver man. Several very good pots were won by the little sport in velvet, causing Dave to growl softly.

"That hour is passing," laughed Vane.

"There are but twenty minutes left of it." The man of the black beard made no reply, but Vane fancied he read a light of desperate determination in his eyes.

"Now," thought the wearer of the violets, "he will try to wool me, if ever."

Still Vane seemed to grow exceedingly careless, for it appeared as if he paid very little attention to Denver Dave when that individual was dealing. But, in reality, he was watching closer than ever.

The black-bearded gambler was indeed an expert, for although he captured two aces from the pack, Old Sunflower did not detect the cheat. But Violet Vane's sharp eyes were not deceived, and from that moment the little sport watched the man from Denver in an open manner, feeling sure he had him foul when he wished to expose the trick.

The time came when Dave determined to make his great move. He skillfully "stocked" the cards, and when Vane cut, he made the "pass," thus bringing them into their original position and spoiling the effectiveness of the cut. Vane saw all this, but remained quiet. Then the man from Denver dealt, and four kings fell to the little sport. He took two aces himself, with the intention of bringing into use the two he had already captured from the pack; but Vane watched him keenly.

The Velvet Sport stood "pat," while Dave drew three cards, saying:

"You must have a great hand?"

"I have," replied Vane, quietly, allowing his eyes to fall from his opponent's hands for a moment.

That brief space of time was enough. Two of the useless cards in Dave's hands changed places with the two aces, thus giving him a hand of four aces.

Then the betting began, and in less than two minutes it was so hot that the spectators at the backs of each of the players moved away to be out of the line of flying bullets. Old Sunflower fairly danced with excitement as the pot grew larger and larger.

Finally Violet Vane threw his cards down on the table, exposing the four kings, saying as he did so:

"I will not rob you, man; the pot is mine."

"Oh, I think not!" declared Denver Dave, exultingly, showing his hand. "Four aces beat four kings any day."

But, as he reached out his hand to draw in the pot, Violet Vane thrust a cocked revolver fairly against his forehead, crying sternly:

"Hands off, or I will scatter your brains!"

The Denver man paled.

"What do you mean?" he snarled. "I have won this money, and I call on the spectators to stand by me."

There was a murmur from the crowd that Vane well understood.

"You should have the money if you *had* won it fairly," he said; "but you did not, therefore it is mine."

"Do you dare insinuate I cheated?" furiously cried the black-bearded gamester.

"That is just what I say."

"Prove it!"

"An easy thing to do. I have seen the working of a sleeve hold-out before now. You will

either give up this money quietly or submit to have your sleeves searched."

Denver Dave became still whiter, then fairly turned black in the face.

"Curse you!" he gritted.

"I believe cheating is considered a lynchable crime in White Water," observed Violet Vane, calmly.

The baffled trickster sprung to his feet.

"Take the money!" he hissed, his face like a thunder-cloud. "I have enough more. But, let me tell you I am a man who never forgets! You shall pay for this with your life!"

Then he turned and strode away.

With a comical grin on his homely face, Old Sunflower called after the defeated gamester, in a drawling tone:

"Oh, say! did you ever git left?"

CHAPTER VI.

THE STUTTERER AS A SHADOWER.

SEIZING an opportunity when the attention of nearly every one was directed to Denver Dave, Stuttering Charlie quietly slipped out of the ring and left the saloon. He wished to thank Violet Vane for taking a hand at such an opportune moment, but for reasons best known to himself, he did not choose to do so then. He saw Stub Smith slinking away and followed in the squat ruffian's footsteps.

But when Charlie passed out of the door Smith had disappeared. He paused for a moment to look back, and saw Humpy Dick sneaking swiftly toward the door. Not wishing another encounter with the brute, he hurried away in the darkness.

At a safe distance, he paused and looked back in time to see the hunchback emerge from the saloon. Humpy Dick also paused to glare back through the open doorway; then he started off at a brisk pace, with the Stutterer on his trail.

It would seem as if he had acted as a shadower before, for he crept along swiftly and with the caution of a cat, never for an instant losing sight of the figure he was following.

Plainly Humpy Dick did not expect to be followed, for he did not look back after his glance into the saloon. As he rolled along with a gait which seemed to say he had been to sea some time in his life, he literally growled in his vicious anger, his oaths being smothered now and then, as he sucked his still tingling fingers.

The shadower grinned as he heard the hunchback's imprecations. Charlie seemed exceedingly pleased about something.

But he did not follow Humpy a great ways. He decided he did not care to travel in the direction the deformed was going, so waving his hand toward the discomfited ruffian in an unseen farewell, he turned aside.

It was plain Charlie had some object in view, for he walked in a direct line toward a given point. And that given point was the cottage occupied by the strange brother and sister known in White Water as Tender Dick and Happy Harry.

Before long he approached the cabin, but slackened his pace and stepped guardedly. There seemed to be no light within the little hut.

Charlie did not advance to the door, but lay down on the ground beside a boulder at least three rods from the cabin. Fixing himself in a comfortable position, he awaited developments.

It seemed as if Charlie had settled down there for the night or was possessed of remarkable patience, for an hour slipped away and nothing occurred to relieve the monotony of his watch. Once or twice he stirred slightly, but it was only to change his position somewhat when he was tired.

Thirty minutes more passed, and the roar of the rapid was threatening to lull the watcher to sleep, when something aroused him—the sound of an approaching footstep.

Instantly the "real Charlie Ross" was all attention, his ears alert, and his eyes peering through the gloom.

He saw an advancing figure. Hugging close to the ground, he watched the man, for man it was.

Straight up to the door of the cabin advanced the unknown. Then he raised his hand and rapped in a peculiar manner. It is probable some one within asked who was there, for he said:

"It is I."

The door was opened quickly, and the voice of Happy Harry exclaimed:

"Oh, Uncle Mat!"

The man stepped in and the door was closed.

"Whew!" whistled Charlie, softly. But the stammerer said not a word, but it was evident he was pleased at something—greatly pleased.

Again changing his position, he sat up with

his back against the boulder, and continued to watch the door for a minute or two. As the man did not immediately come out, the shadower arose and cautiously approached the cabin.

At the window Charlie paused and listened, but he took good care not to rise so he could be seen from within. The inmates of the hut were still in the dark, and the spy knew it would not be a difficult thing for them to detect any one who should get too close to the window.

He could faintly hear the murmur of voices, one being that of a man and the others children's; but he could not understand what they were saying. This did not satisfy him, so he tried to find a crevice, where their words would come to him more distinctly. Round the hut he crept in his search, listening at a dozen different points, but was finally forced to abandon the search as useless. Then he settled down to listen to the general murmur.

The man seemed to be speaking harshly, though guardedly, and Harry was pleading with him. Only now and then would Dick put in a word, and when he did speak Charlie could scarcely hear him, his voice was so low and faltering.

The man remained in the cabin more than half an hour, and during that time the shadower crouched close to the wall. Finally the visitor took his departure.

With still greater caution than he had used in following Humpy Dick, Charlie crept along after the mysterious visitor at the cabin.

The man carefully skirted the denser collection of huts and made for a distant side of the pocket. Close to the great wall that towered high into the air, the unknown came upon two persons who seemed to be waiting for him, and the three held a long consultation.

Eager to hear what they were saying, the shadower wormed his way along the ground, taking desperate chances of being discovered. But once more he was to meet with disappointment, for the men spoke very low, and before he reached a position where he could hear more than an occasional word, they separated, two of them going in one direction and the third in another. Charlie decided the third man was the one he wished to follow.

The man apparently was in a hurry and he led Charlie at a swift pace toward the upper end of the rapid in the stream.

In an unfrequented spot beneath a tree a horse was hitched. The unknown unhitched the animal and sprang upon his back. The next moment he was away.

Charlie stood and listened to the clatter of hoofs as the animal crossed the bridge and struck the rock trail upon the further side of the stream. Gradually the sounds died out in the distance, and when they could no longer be heard, the shadower turned toward the hotel, with a muttered something that sounded suspiciously like an anathema maranatha.

CHAPTER VII.

BLACK WORK AT THE BRIDGE.

VIOLET VANE and Frank Stillman stood face to face! Straight into each other's eyes they glared, bitter hatred written on their features.

"So it is you, is it?" cried Vane, scornfully.

"Yes, it is I," was the reply, as Stillman endeavored to repress his excitement. "And I see you have followed me here. I thought you were dead."

"And hoped so, too, I presume. Well, you were mistaken. I am very much alive."

"Much to my regret. Why have you come here?"

Vane made a haughty gesture.

"I know of no reason why I should account for my acts to you."

"I know why you have come! But, curse you! you shall never put your vile plot into execution!"

Excitement was getting the best of Frank.

"You are talking strangely. What do you mean?"

"As if you did not know! No one but a coward would strike at a woman as you have done!"

"You speak in enigmas."

"Do you dare say you do not understand what I mean?"

"I dare say I wish you would make your meaning plainer."

"You understand it well enough. You have come here for 'vengeance,' as you see fit to call it. There is but one course open to me. I must meet you as I did once before."

Vane laughed metallically.

"And if I refuse to meet you?"

"I will shoot you down like a dog!"

A cold and scornful smile remained on the face of the man in velvet.

"You did that once. You did your best to end my career when there was no danger to yourself, for I fired into the air."

"But we had met in a fair duel. How could I know you intended firing into the air?"

"You did not. For your act then I feel no bitterness against you. I hoped then your bullet would end my life, and I now wish it had!"

For a few seconds Stillman was silenced; then he cried:

"I do not want to take your life!—I do not want your blood on my hands! For God's sake, go away from this pocket and never let me look on your face again!"

Once more that bitter smile!

"I go where fate may lead. It has led me here, and here I remain."

"You refuse to go away?"

"Yes."

"That leaves only one course open to

"That is—?"

"To kill you!"

"So you would become a common assassin?"

"If you refuse to meet me in an honorable manner—yes."

"Well, go ahead with your work. I have courted death, but death has proved shy. I have run all manner of risks, but something has preserved me until the present time. If you think it your duty to kill me, draw and do the deed."

Stillman became white to the lips.

"It would only be for my darling wife—for Ione!" he murmured.

"For her!" sneered Vane. "For the false and heartless one! She is—"

"Stop!" fairly snarled the Mayor of White Water, his eyes flashing and his teeth gleaming like those of an enraged beast. "Do you dare say a word against her? She is pure and good as the angels! Wretch! you deserve to die!"

He tore out a revolver, drew back the hammer and thrust the muzzle almost against Violet Vane's breast just over the heart.

"Say your prayers!" he hissed, shaking in every limb with the intensity of his excitement. "In one minute you die!"

Violet Vane calmly folded his arms, the scornful smile still on his lips. There was no sign of fear—not the least tremor to indicate the man's nerves were shaken. Silently he looked into Frank Stillman's eyes.

It was a terrible tableau.

Swiftly the seconds sped. Stillman still shook with the emotion that had driven him to madness.

"Say your prayers!" he repeated.

Still the threatened man was silent—silent while standing on the very threshold of death, as it seemed.

But, the would-be slayer was suddenly overcome. His hand fell with the revolver, while he lifted the other and put it over his eyes, staggering back as if struck fairly in the face.

"I can't do it—now!" he gasped. "I must give you a chance."

"I ask for nothing at your hands," declared Vane; and it almost seemed that there was a touch of disappointment in his voice.

"Still I shall give you till nightfall to leave White Water."

"I shall not go."

"Then—for her sake—I shall kill you!"

"You will not have the nerve."

"You think so because I failed now; but, you do not know me. I am desperate."

"In the length of time you have given I can ruin you in White Water."

"How?"

"I can brand you as an outlaw."

"But you cannot prove it."

"I can."

"Well, go ahead—I defy you!"

"I fancy you do not understand how much you are venturing by failing to complete your work now. You may never have another chance, for if I brand you as an outlaw, by night you may be expelled from White Water yourself and to-morrow I may be mayor in your stead."

"I shall take my chances."

"But, that is not all. Your wife—"

"Do not speak of her!"

"It almost seems as if you have forgotten the past."

"I have not—no, no, no! I understand what you mean, now. For God's sake do not let her see you! I fear it would drive her mad!"

"And do you ask a favor from me?"

"I only ask that you will keep away from her to-day. Promise me that!"

"If I will not promise—?"

"You must!"

"I will give you my word she shall not see me to know who I am."

"That is enough."

"Enough—enough! My God! Think of all she once was to me—before you came between us! Man, man! can you wonder I hate you?"

"I have nothing to say, if you blame only me. She could not fail to obey the dictation of her heart."

"Why should I not seek revenge?" cried Vane. "If you stood in my place you would know no rest till your thirst for vengeance was sated. I did not follow you here. Heaven knows I hoped never to look on your face again! Heaven knows I have prayed I might never see her again! But, fate flung me once again into your sphere. Whatever may result, fate alone is to blame."

"It is useless for us to longer discuss these things. I have warned you; take heed. Do not dream for a moment I shall fail to keep my word. I have said I am a desperate man—God knows if I am on the verge of madness! But, I will hesitate at no deed, no matter how red, to keep you from bringing one moment of misery to the one I love so truly! I beg you to leave this pocket before nightfall! It will keep me from becoming a murderer! Go, go, go!"

With these words, Frank Stillman turned and walked swiftly away, leaving Violet Vane to watch his retreating figure, a strange look in his dark eyes.

Several hours later Old Sunflower was sitting within a room at the Columbia Hotel, while with his hands clinched tightly behind his back, Violet Vane was pacing to and fro in the same apartment. There was a look of deepest sympathy on the face of the ragged tramp, but he remained silent, only glancing at Vane now and then.

Finally the man in velvet paused and faced the vagrant, a bitter laugh breaking from his lips.

"What does it all amount to, anyway?" he exclaimed. "It is like the million of farces that are being enacted all over this miserable world to-day. What is man but a pinch of dust! What is life but a breath! What is love but mockery! Here, there, everywhere on the face of this old earth are human beings living, loving, hating, dying! And still time rolls serenely on. We are here to-day; to-morrow we are dead and forgotten. It makes no difference how much we may have loved or how much we may have suffered—we are gone, and the world rolls on the same. How insignificant our miserable little lives seem when we compare them with infinity! How laughable seem all our loves and hatreds when we think of the millions of human beings who are loving and hating in exactly the same manner! It is all a wretched farce!"

"Derned ef I don't believe ye are goin' plum' daft, leetle pard!" gasped the sunflower tramp, staring hard at Vane. "I never heerd ye talk thet thar way afore. Great holy jehocus! What's got inter ye?"

"I have told you how the woman I loved proved false to me—I have told you she is here, married and happy."

"Yep."

"Well, I have seen her."

"Is thet so?"

"Yes; I saw her with her baby in her arms. Can you understand what such a sight was to me?"

"Derned ef I don't b'lieve I kin! It must 'a' made ye feel like squozin' some galoot's woozle."

"This morning I stood face to face with the man who robbed me of her."

"Whar is he buried?"

"He is Frank Stillman, the Mayor of White Water."

"An' ye didn't kill him?"

"No."

"Dad-burned ef I kin understan' w'at kinder stuff you are made of!"

"If I killed him, I should bring a great grief to the woman I once loved. Erastus, I still love that woman too well to wish to cause her a moment of unhappiness!"

Old Sunflower shook his head, muttering:

"I'm derned ef I kin understan' it!"

Vane began to pace the floor again.

"I have sought danger and faced death, but the grim monster has refrained from putting his hand on me. I have been sacred from his touch. Of death I have not the least fear, but it comes not to me. I am not a fool to take my own life, so I reckon I am destined to live on a while

longer. I would be satisfied, if I could only forget. Perhaps the future may bring me forgetfulness. God knows I hope so!"

Night!

The day had passed, and still Violet Vane remained in White Water City.

A man left the Columbia Hotel and walked away toward the bridge that spanned the stream. Another man, who happened to be passing the hotel, followed cautiously in the footsteps of the first.

The one who came from the hotel did not know he was pursued. Straight onward he walked, never pausing for an instant or turning his head to look back.

Like a shadow of ill-omen followed the pursuer.

The roar of the rapid sounded sullenly through the darkness. A night-bird uttered a sudden shriek as of terror as with a swish of wings, it swept into the gloom.

The bridge was reached and the man walked slowly out upon it. Nearly midway, he halted and leaned upon the low rail, gazing down at the black water rushing swiftly down the shoot to be churned into foam by the rocks which rose below the bridge. Almost beneath him was a part of the jagged rock which served as one of the central supports of the bridge. He thought of what a certain death a man would meet should he fall from the bridge and be carried down upon the sharp rocks by the water.

A sudden premonition of danger shot through his head, and he would have started back.

Too late!

There was a red flash of fire in the darkness, followed by the sharp report of a revolver!

With a snapping sound, the rail gave way beneath the man on the bridge and he plunged downward.

There was a splash—then silence. The stream swept relentlessly on through the night.

Back from the bridge crept a crouching figure that held a deadly weapon clutched in one hand.

"That is the last of Violet Vane!" muttered a hoarse voice.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE RISE OF THE REGULATORS.

DESPITE the reward offered for his capture, Black Burk continued his depredations. He plainly held White Water and her citizens in derision.

One morning a paper was found tacked upon the door of the Columbia Hotel. Written on it in a strong, bold hand, was the following:

"DEFIANCE!"

"Certain citizens of White Water have been making some very foolish talk of late concerning Black Burk and his band of jolly toll-takers. All your foolish threats are known to me, and I laugh at them. If the reward for my capture was \$10,000 instead of \$500, there would be none smart enough to secure it. I scorn you all and defy you. The most valuable claims in White Water belong to myself and my men, and as we have been unjustly cheated out of them, we mean to have a round share of their proceeds.

"In conclusion, let me warn one particular person in White Water to step mighty softly. That person is Frank Stillman, the so-called 'mayor.' I have a rod in pickle for him, and some day he will get the whole benefit of it. If I should take a notion, I might descend on the town some night and completely wipe it out. It will be well for my enemies that I do not take a notion.

"Yours lovingly,

"BLACK BURK,
"Champion Tax-Collector."

As may be imagined, this open and insulting defiance aroused many of the citizens to a white heat, and it was declared something must be done immediately.

The result was the appearance of a somewhat mysterious band of men who called themselves "The Regulators" and were the openly avowed enemies of Black Burk and his gang of robbers.

The leading spirit of the Regulators was a man of mystery, even to the greater part of his followers. He rode a black horse, dressed in black from head to foot, and his face was concealed by a black mask. But, his chief peculiarity lay in the fact that he seldom spoke. It was known he could talk, for once or twice at critical moments he had given an order; but his habitual silence won for him the name of Captain Mute.

Captain Mute did not have a commanding figure, though it was firm and supple and showed physical strength and endurance in every movement; but there was something magnetic and attractive about the man that gave him perfect control over the rough fellows who pledged

themselves to stand by him in wiping out Black Burk and his desperadoes.

The Regulators soon showed a proclivity to appear suddenly at the most unexpected moments and take charge of things in general. It soon became plain that they were the rulers of White Water, for all of its mayor and "city government." But, Stillman cared nothing for this so long as they did not interfere with his concerns. For some reason, he had not been invited to become one of the organization, but he believed they would be doing that section of the country a service if they broke up the band of robbers that had taken to plundering the coaches.

One morning after an uncommonly quiet night in White Water two suspicious characters were found hanging to a tree with placards pinned to their breasts, saying they were road-agents. The Regulators had been at work, and cloths bound tightly over the mouths of the unfortunate men explained why they had not aroused the camp by their cries.

After that the "shady" characters of the town were prone to "lay mighty low." Humpy Dick and Stub Smith cooled down in a remarkable manner and seemed constantly on the alert, as if ready to resist an attack.

Black Burk was furious. He posted another notice on the door of the hotel, saying he would surely avenge the death of his two confederates. Denver Dave read the notice and laughed.

"That fellow talks pretty bold for the desperado he is," he observed. "I should say he is a might bad man."

"You are right," nodded the miner, Red Hot; "he is a p'izen cuss an' hangin's too good fer him. He oughter be dragged ter death ahind a wild broncho."

"What fearful crime has he committed besides robbery?" asked the man from Denver. "Has he killed any one?"

"Not yit; but he's made threats, an' he tried ter wipe Snappy out. But he's sulted ther dignity of White Water City, an' thet's more'n a hangin' 'fense, bet your boots!"

Old Sunflower was here, there and everywhere, listening a little and talking a great deal. Two weeks had passed since the mysterious disappearance of Violet Vane, and the old vagrant insisted his "leetle pard" had been dealt foully with.

"All I want is ter git on ther trail o' ther cowardly skunk thet wiped him out," the tramp declared. "Look in me eye an' behole gore—crimson gore! I am a very, very b-a-a-d man, an' w'en I gits me war-paint on thar's usually er ruction o' some sort or t'other. I'm yit goin' ter took ther skelp o' ther varmint thet downed Sweet Violets—you heur me!"

One night the stage for White Water was halted several miles from the pocket. Black Burk and his men blocked the trail.

"I have not a minute of time to waste," declared the chief of the road-agents; "so cut all foolishness now. There is a man on that hearse I want to see. Horace Danton will oblige me by piling out here about as lively as he knows how."

On hearing the name, a rather sad-looking passenger of middle age started violently.

Burk rode his horse along beside the stage and pointed a cocked revolver at the head of the sad-faced man.

"It is you I am after!" he cried, exultantly; "so you had better get out as lively as you are able. I am in an almighty hurry just now, and if you are not on the ground in less than a minute, I'll put a bullet through your head."

"But—but, sir—" stammered the passenger.

"There are no 'buts' about it!" interrupted the desperado leader. "It is straight business from the shoulder. Get out or chew lead!"

With reluctance the man arose and descended from the stage. The moment he touched the ground, Burk cried:

"Go on, driver!"

But at this moment a cheer of twenty voices sent the echoes leaping from rock to rock of the canyon and a band of mounted men burst into view, sweeping down on the road-agents like a cyclone.

"The Regulators! the Regulators!"

The dismayed desperadoes uttered the cry, and without waiting for word from their chief, whirled to fly.

A snarling curse came from Black Burk's lips. For but an instant he hesitated, then he shouted:

"You at least shall not escape me, Horace Danton! I am Rougal, your deadly foe of old, and now you die by my hand!"

He threw out the hand that held the revolver and fired even as his horse was wheeling.

Down in a heap fell the sad-faced passenger.

Black Burk followed his men, turning in the

saddle to wave his hand derisively at the pursuing Regulators.

Mounted on his magnificent black horse, Captain Mute led the pursuers. He rode like a Centaur, the bridle-rein lying loose on the horse's neck. In his hands the man held a repeating-rifle, but he did not offer to use it until the stage was passed. Then he threw it up, and scarcely had the breech touched his shoulder when a puff of smoke leaped from the muzzle, and the sharp spang of the weapon echoed along the canyon.

Down went one of the robbers' horses, hurling its rider far over its head.

Again the deadly rifle spoke, and again a horse fell.

Then the robbers disappeared beyond a bend in the canyon, and the Regulators were also soon lost to view.

To the surprise of every one, the sad-faced passenger, whom all supposed fatally injured, arose to his feet quite untouched.

"I saw the man meant to shoot," he explained, "and so I dropped. I was just in time."

The road-agents who had been thrown from their horses were either stunned or killed, for they did not stir. However, no one paid any attention to them, and the stage was soon moving onward toward White Water, as if nothing had happened.

CHAPTER IX.

DANTON IN DISGUISE.

THE stage reached White Water without further molestation, and the driver, who held the ribbons in Snappy Seth's place since the daring Jehu was injured, had a thrilling tale to tell the people who were waiting its arrival.

Horace Danton escaped into the hotel before the driver told how near he came to being a victim of Black Burk's revolver. Within the bar-room he examined the Register carefully, apparently searching for something. Finally he found what he was looking for. It read:

"Charlie Ross, Room No. 3."

Two minutes later Danton was rapping at the door of Room No. 3.

"Cuc-cuc-cuc-come in," called a voice, and the sad-faced man entered.

It was more than an hour later that two men left that room and passed out of the hotel. One of them was Stuttering Charlie. The stammerer's companion appeared like a rather rough fellow, dressed in slouchy clothes and wearing a lop-brimmed hat. A bushy beard concealed his face almost to the eyes. But about the man there was one "dead give-away." His hands were white and shapely, quite unlike those of a common laborer, which was plainly the character he hoped to be taken for.

It was Horace Danton in disguise.

"It is a fine day, J-j-jack," observed Charlie, as they left the hotel steps.

"A right peert sort uv er day," growled Danton, in reply, his voice sounding hoarse and smothered in the depths of his huge false beard.

The shadow of a smile flitted across the stammerer's face.

"I will show you all round over the tut-tut-town," he said. "It is a b-b-b-booming little place, and dud-dud-don't you forget that."

"I've heerd as how it wuz howlin' right erlong on ther high road uv prosperusness; but I want ter let you know it's got ter keep wide erwake an' pushin' ter ermount ter shucks side uv Hackensock City. Hackensock's boun' ter be a metropolis, I want you ter distinctly understan'. I know, fer I've bin thar an' lived thar. W'en Snap Shot Jack asseverates er thing you kin put it down as Gospel straight frum ther shoulder."

Charlie put his hand to his mouth and coughed, in this manner keeping from laughing.

"I guess you will let Hackensock City gug-gug-go to blazes and settle down here when you sus-sus-see what kind of a place this is and what it is bound to b-b-be."

In a short time they wandered away toward the place where Charlie was in the habit of meeting Happy Harry. Their actions were singular, for they separated some time before reaching the spot, Danton sitting down on the ground behind a bowlder, so that he could not be seen by any one who should come from the cabin.

Charlie proceeded to the spot where he usually met the strange girl and seated himself on a bowlder. It was not long before Harry appeared and espied him. He waved his handkerchief to her and she came dancing toward him.

"Oh, Charlie!" she exclaimed—she had

learned to call him that—"I have not seen you for two whole days! Where have you been?"

"Bub-bub-business has kept me away," he replied.

"Business!" she cried in amazement. "I did not know you had any business."

"Well, I have."

"What is it?"

"I'm hunting for my fuf-fuf-father now," he laughed. "You sus-sus-sus-see he has offered a reward for mum-mum-my recovery and I am bound t-t-to scoop the boodle."

"Oh, what are you trying to chaff me for! I can see you are fibbing by the look in your eyes. You must think I am a reg'ler chump!"

"I think you are a regular dud-dud—"

"Oh, that is worse still!" laughed Harry. "I'd be 'most anything before I'd be a dud-dud!"

"Cuc-cuc-cuc—"

"That's what a hen says when she cackles—cuc-cuc-cadawcut. It's real mean of you to mock a poor hen, Charlie!"

Charlie rammed his cane into the ground in a vicious manner, while he cried, desperately:

"Cuc-cuc-can't you wait till I gig-gig-get a word out before you cut me off in t-t-that way? I meant to sus-sus-sus—"

"Oh, dear sus!" shouted Harry, in a veritable paroxysm of merriment.

"I meant to sus-sus-say I think you a regular dud-dud-daisy."

"Oh, that's it! Well, I did think your tut-tut-tongue would not hold out to sus-sus-say it. Oh, Charlie! you don't know what a jolly fellow you are! If it were not for you, I would just die for the lack of amusement. I was blue as a whetstone before I saw you to-day."

"What made you b-b-blue?"

A cloud came over Harry's merry face and she shook her curly head, sadly.

"Dick is not well at all."

"What is the mum-mum-matter with him?"

"He has a dreadful bad cough."

"A cough? Why d-d-don't you have a dud-dud-doctor?"

"It would cost so much; and you see, Uncle Mat—" She stopped in consternation.

"You are mistaken," asserted the stammerer. "I d-d-do not sus-sus-see Uncle Mat at all. Who is he?"

"Oh, nobody—nobody at all!" declared Harry, looking frightened.

"T-t-that won't go down," said Charlie. "Why should you conceal everything from mum-mum-me! Am I n-n-not your friend?"

"Oh, I think so—I hope so! But I cannot tell—really I can't!"

"Why not?"

"He would be so angry!" she replied, scarcely realizing what she was saying. "He has made me promise not to tell a word. He has made me promise not to— Good gracious!" gaspingly. "I am saying things I ought not to!"

Her face had lost all its sunniness, and she seemed ready to burst into tears. Charlie was uneasy, but relentless.

"If you won't tell me about this Uncle Mat," he said, "why won't you t-t-take me to the cabin and let me sus-sus-see your brother?"

"No, no! You have promised not to come till I said you might. You cannot come now."

"This seems very mysterious. I d-d-don't know what to think of it."

"Then don't think of it at all."

"That is impossible."

"Oh, dear!" wringing her hands. "I don't know what to do!"

"And I don't know how t-t-to help you do it."

Then their eyes met, and the next moment both were laughing. Harry had one of those peculiar natures that sometimes changed from grief to merriment in the twinkling of an eye.

"Is your b-b-brother very sick?" asked Charlie.

"He can sit up, but he coughs 'most all the time, and it sounds so hollow it makes me shiver."

"Consumption?" was the thought that flashed through the stammerer's mind.

"Won't you let me sus-sus-send the doctor?" he asked.

"No, no, no! Dick does not want to see a doctor. I have some medicine I am giving him. He will be better soon, I am sure."

But Charlie was not so sure.

At this moment Horace Danton arose to his feet and approached the couple. Harry saw him almost instantly.

"Oh, who is that ugly-looking man?" she asked, drawing a little closer to her companion.

Charlie laughed.

"He d-d-does look ugly, don't he?"

"And see how he stares at me!" exclaimed Harry. "I am afraid of him."

"I thought you were not afraid of the Old Bub-bub-boy himself."

But there was something about the appearance of Horace Danton that filled the usually fearless girl with alarm. He truly did look like a ruffian at a short distance.

"I think I had better go now, Charlie," she said, still keeping her eyes on the advancing man. "He is coming here."

"But I hope you will not gug-gug-go. I will protect you from injury."

"You, Charlie? Goodness! what would you amount to with such a ruffian as that? He could swallow you! I am going now. Look out for yourself."

"Oh, say!" cried Charlie, desperately. "I d-d-don't want you to go! Please stay!"

He caught her by the arm.

"I believe you are really frightened out of your wits," she declared. "But, I can't stay and protect you, for I have not my gun. I will run to the house and get the revolver, and if that man hurts you, I will come back and shoot him through the head."

She broke from him and ran toward the cottage, pausing to look back before she disappeared through the doorway. What she saw caused her some surprise. Both Charlie and the stranger were standing still, staring after her.

"I wonder who that man can be?" she muttered. "Charlie does not seem afraid of him after all."

She entered the cabin and peered from the window. There she saw the two men meet and speak together earnestly for a few seconds, after which they walked away together.

"Now what does that mean?" she asked herself, shaking her pretty head in perplexity. "They act exactly as if they knew each other well."

Dick's hollow cough sounded behind her, and his weak voice asked:

"Who is that you are speaking of, sister?"

She turned with a start.

"Oh, nobody in particular," she replied, not thinking it best to explain everything to the sick lad. "How are you feeling now—better?"

He shook his head, pressing his hands on his breast.

"It hurts awfully when I cough hard," he replied, in a pitiful manner. "What do you suppose makes it hurt so, Harry?"

CHAPTER X.

OLD SUNFLOWER AND IONE.

How Old Sunflower managed to get a living in White Water was something of a mystery. He had been "dead broke" when he arrived in the camp and had apparently remained so ever since, but for all of that, he lived and lost no flesh. His smile remained as quaint as ever and he was continually making talk he could not "back up."

The shaggy-headed old fellow was something of a mystery, for no man could tell when he would fight and when he would run away. His courage was of the most uneven and unreasonable character, for at times he would be nearly frightened out of his wits at almost nothing at all—or would seem to be—while at other times Satan himself could not scare him.

His one great weakness was a love for liquor, but in White Water that was not considered a weakness unless a man got "off his feet" seven days out of the week. Nearly everybody drank if they could get the cash to pay for the poison. The exceptions were few and far between, hence Frank Stillman's failure in attempting to close the saloons.

Old Sunflower stood on the steps of the Columbia Hotel and watched Stuttering Charlie and Horace Danton approach. The old fellow shook his head and grinned, as he softly muttered:

"Suthin' derved sing'ler 'bout thet checker-board chap, I'll 'low. Blamed ef I kin jest size him up! He acts like er fresh frum Rain-water Crick, but ther way he knocked ther corners offen Stub Smith an' Humpy Dick wuz beaucherful ter witness, amen! Them critters hain't tackled him since, but I reckon they're jist layin' low fer ther chance ter swipe him fer keeps."

As Charlie and his companion came forward, the stammerer asked, by way of keeping up the deception:

"Well, what d-d-d-do you think of the pup-pup-place, Jack?"

"Oh, it'll do, it'll do! But I'm stickin' ter my 'riginal statement thet it can't hold er candle ter Hackensock. Thet thar town's boun' ter be ther greatest howlin' ole burgh in this yere part of ther kentry, you hear meshout!"

"Bub-bub-bub-but d-d-don't you think you will stop in White Water a while? Perhaps you may cuc-cuc-conclude to stay here after all when you have seen more of us."

"Waal, I may lay roun' er few days. I hain't got any bit of business on my han's jest erbout now, so it don't make er derved bit of diffrence whar I am."

The sunflower tramp eyed the man keenly as he followed Charlie into the hotel. When they had disappeared, the vagabond winked knowingly at empty space.

"Dad-blamed ef I hain't onter thet critter with both feet!" he chuckled. "Spect I do look like er bloomin' fool, but then I kin sometimes see er hoe! in a ladder. Ef them whiskers hain't snide I don't know beans from hen's eggs!"

He peered back through the open doorway and watched the two ascend the stairs.

"Goin' up ter ther room o' ther feller thet bites his words up in sich er queer way. Yep, thar's su'thin' quare 'bout him. He hain't ther tenderfute he looks, an' I know thet! He's heur fer some puppose. I wonder w'at it is?"

He was still wondering when Frank Stillman passed the hotel. The vagabond watched the mayor closely, a savage gleam in his eyes.

"Singe your hide!" he half growled. "You're ther cause o' it all! You played roots on my leetle pard, an' I more'n hafe believe you know w'at's become o' him."

Stillman's appearance had changed remarkably. Since his meeting with Violet Vane a haggard look had settled on his handsome face and now and then a light of dread and fear flashed from his eyes. He seemed like a man who was continually troubled by the memory of some fearful deed.

Old Sunflower had noted the change, and he was quick to reason out what he more than half believed was the cause of it. The Velvet Sport had disappeared in a most singular and unaccountable manner, and, knowing what had passed between the two men, the veteran tramp was more than half-inclined to believe Stillman had played some foul game on Vane—had murdered him, perhaps.

"Ef ther boy don't show up afore long," muttered Old Sunflower, gazing after Stillman's retreating figure, "I'm jest goin' ter straddle your neck. Ef you've downed him, I'll down you—or bust!"

When the mayor had disappeared, the tramp struck his hands together, exclaiming, softly:

"I hev wanted ter see ther leetle gal fer some time, an' now's my chance. She shook ez white er boy as ever drored breath, fer which I hev my 'pinion o' her; but I'd jest like ter sot eyes on her erg'in. She wuz 'tarnal putty, an' thet's right! Sh' wuz jest erbout ther peertest sort o' er piece o' calicer I ever sot my ole optical organs on. I wonder ef she's faded out ary bit sence she wur merried? Vane said she looked puttyer'n ever, but his 'pinion in sech er case ez this w'u'dn't ermount ter shucks. I'll bet she's all washed out."

He set out for Stillman's cabin, and as he walked along, he continued to mutter:

"Oh, I know she can't look ser all-fired peert es she used ter! But I'll see ther babby, thet'll be some satisfaction, fer I hain't seen er right down ginowine human babby fer derved nigh er hull lifetime o' Sundays. But ef she says ary thing ter me erbout Violets"—savagely—"I'll tell her jest w'at I think o' her an' ther way she acted."

In a short time he approached the cabin. The door was standing open, and he paused outside to listen to a sweet voice crooning a soft cradle song. For some reason, the sound of that song affected the old man strangely. He began to tremble and seemed ready to burst into tears. Indeed the moisture gathered so thickly in his eyes he was obliged to wipe it away with his coat-sleeve. He was strongly tempted to retreat without entering the cabin; but by a desperate effort, he mastered his emotion and stepped into the doorway.

Ione gave a little exclamation as the ragged figure appeared, but Sunflower doffed his hat, bowing politely and saying:

"You hain't got nary bit o' reason ter be 'feared o' me, leetle one; I w'u'dn't hurt ye fer ther hull o' Kingdom Come."

At first the darkness of the room prevented him from seeing her, as he had just come out of the bright sunlight; but finally he could see her standing before him with her baby in her arms. It was a picture the old man never forgot.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Great Jehocus! It can't be you've forgotten me, leetle gal? Jest takz ernother squint at this yere antiquated figger an' see ef I don't look natteral's life an' twice ez hombly."

Ione peered into his face, then started back, clasping her child closer and crying:

"Mr. Wagg!"

The appearance of the tramp brought back the memory of the old days—the days she longed to forget. Then this man had been one of Violet Vane's most enthusiastic admirers!

"Mister Wagg!" repeated Old Sunflower—"not by er derved—excuse me!—I mean not by a—a—big figger. Thar hain't no 'mister' hitched ter ther front o' my name, beggin' yer pardon. You used ter know me as Erastus Wagg; but now I sail under the cognomen o' Ole Sunflower, an' I'm er dood by perfession. I'm right glad ter see ye!"

Ione still drew back.

"Do you come as a friend or an enemy?" she asked.

The vagrant scowled a bit, but quickly replied:

"Er frien', in course. I ain't got northin' ag'in' ye, leetle gal—thet is, northin' thet'd cause me ter harm ye. I did hope you'd be glad ter see me."

"I am," she said, laying the baby in the rude crib its father had made. "You have fought for me in the past, and I have not forgotten it."

She came forward and placed her small hand in his. The old fellow actually blushed and stammered.

"Blame my eyes!" he cried. "You're han'sumer then ye used ter wuz! I didn't reckon on thet. You yuz er gal then an' hed ther form o' er gal; but you've jest blossomed out inter er reg'ler smashin' woman. Ther bud wuzn't no more'n er fair promise o' ther flower."

It was Ione's turn to blush.

"Why, Erastus!" she exclaimed; "I did not know you were poetical!"

"Oh, I hev lots o' fallin's you never knew erbout, leetle gal."

"Well, sit down. Let me take your hat."

"Oh, no, no! I'll jest putt this relic o' Benjamin Franklin right hyer on ther floor aside ther chair. You see it's so blamed vallyble I don't 'low it out o' my sight fer fear some one'd steal it. It's got dented er leetle, but then I don't mine thet. It hes er very swell appearance, as ther teller said o' ther boil."

"I cannot see as you have changed a bit."

"Oh, no; I am not subject to change, fer you see I'm dead broke all ther time. Is thar any danger o' ther house fallin' on me ef I try ter make another bad joke like thet?"

Ione laughed a little.

"The house is built quite solid."

"Well, I'm glad o' thet. Blamed ef it don't look cozy in hyer! This is er reg'ler leetle nest."

"I try to make it as cozy as I can, but I have not many things to work with. It is some different from the old days away back in my Eastern home. There I had everything a girl could ask for."

"Then you hain't jest satisfied?" came quickly, eagerly, from old Sunflower's lips.

"Oh, yes I am!" she swiftly replied. "I am more than satisfied—I am happy, happy! This little home is better than a mansion."

The man seemed disappointed.

"But—I 'lowed I could see er kinder sad look in yer eyes."

He was right; he did see a sad look there. But, her sadness was overwhelmed by the happiness of her present life—her sadness was caused by one haunting memory of the past. She was somewhat nervous, too; for the effect of the shock given her by the note that stated Violet Vane lived for vengeance had not entirely worn away. Her husband had assured her many times it was a wretched hoax perpetrated by some dastardly coward, but still the feeling of dread would not entirely leave her.

"Why should I be sad?"

"Oh, I—I dunno," he replied, not daring tell her his feeling that she had wronged Vane. "I thought perhap' ye wuz."

She looked him straight in the eyes, and summoning her courage, said, not without a tremor:

"I think I understand you, Erastus; but you are wrong. As a girl, I made a serious error; but my woman's heart revealed it to me in time to prevent a fatal step. I do not deny that the man was worthy of my love or the love of any woman living, but I did not truly love him. I met another whom I did love with my heart and soul. I could not help it; I tried to crush the passion out of my heart! but it gained the mastery and I became its slave. To-day I do not regret my bondage."

The man was silent.

"I have no doubt you blame me," she pursued; "but if you knew my feelings, you would not—you could not! Of course I have suffered. If I had been a heartless creature my course

would not have cost me a second thought; but the knowledge of the pain I was giving a true heart was bitter indeed. But that was eclipsed by the knowledge of the terrible thing that followed."

"W'at wuz thet?"

"Oh, do not ask me! How can I speak of it? I tried to forget it, and I almost thought I was partially succeeding till that dreadful note fell into my hands!"

Sunflower was a trifle puzzled, so he once more remained silent. Again she looked him fairly in the eyes, speaking slowly:

"That note brought a doubt to my mind, and I have longed to know the truth. Perhaps you can aid me?"

"Ef I kin I will."

"Do you know my husband and Philip Howard fought a duel?"

"Yep."

"And do you know Philip fell before Frank's fire?"

"I've heerd so."

"Well, it is true. But since that time I have been given reasons to believe Philip was not killed. Can you tell me the truth?"

"Yep."

She sprung forward and caught him by the arm, trembling in every limb with the intensity of her excitement.

"You can—you can?" she almost shrieked.

"Then speak—speak! Was he killed?"

"Not by er derved sight!" spluttered the tramp. "Fer Heaving's sake don't kerflop now!"

She reeled back and fell on her knees beside the crib, clasping the baby to her heart.

"Great God, I thank thee!" she cried. "Now I can face what may come! I fear it not! My baby boy is not the son of a man who has another's blood upon his hands!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE TRAMP IN TROUBLE.

BUT, Old Sunflower was not so sure of that. However, he did not care to express his views just then, for he saw Ione was in a state of intense excitement. Still holding her baby close, and covering its face with kisses, she kept repeating:

"Thank God! thank God! thank God!"

Tears of joy ran down her cheeks, and despite himself, Old Sunflower could not keep the moisture out of his own eyes. He half-turned away, dashing one huge hand across his face in a manner that was little short of savage.

"No, don't go an' be er derved slobberin' idiot!" he muttered to himself. "W'u'dn't it look nice fer you ter go ter sniffin' like er big overgrown booby! Fer Heaving's sake, do dry up!"

The baby laughed and crowed, pounding its mother's lips with its soft, chubby hands, apparently thinking every one was as happy as itself.

Ione arose, with her child in her arms.

"He may seek revenge on me, but I do not fear him!" she cried. "The last vestige of a cloud over my life has been removed."

The vagabond choked down the huge lump in his throat and said:

"You needn't never fear thet ther lad will harm ye. He hain't thet kind."

Then she told him of the note threatening vengeance.

"Ther boyee never writ it!" shouted Sunflower, in a rage. "Some mis'ble cus-tomer is 'sponsible fer thet trick!"

"Frank said it was a hoax, but I feared—I feared! Still my fear of the man would not have been so great as my joy at knowing he really lived. You have brought me a great happiness to-day, Erastus."

"Wal, I'm glad on it, leetle woman."

"Do you know where Philip is now?"

Sunflower shook his head, soberly.

"What makes you look that way?" she asked, starting forward. "You look as if—as if—"

"Sif I'd lost er frien'? Waal, perhaps I hev. It is a solemncholly fac' thet I don't know whar Violets is, an'—an'—"

"And what?"

The tramp was greatly embarrassed, but finally he burst out:

"Ter tell ther honest truth, leetle woman, I'm 'feared he's bin dealt foul with."

She caught her breath and turned pale.

"What do you mean?"

"Two weeks ergo he wuz hyer in this camp, an'—"

"Here?"

Sunflower nodded.

"Right hyer."

"Heavens! And Frank never told me a word about it!"

A queer look flitted across the vagabond's face.

"That was a little after I received that note!" said Ione.

"But he never hed no han' in thet," put in the man, quickly. "Don't ye go fer ter git thet inter yer noddle."

"What brought him here?"

"I reckon it wuz er happenstance, same as it wuz with me."

"Did he know I was here?"

"He diskivered it arter he got hyer."

"And he did not stay? What happened? Oh, tell me everything! You are so slow!"

"I can't tell jest w'at happened, but I am satisfied he wuz played foul."

"What makes you think so?"

"He hed no idea o' leavin' White Water, but he lef' ther hotel one night an' failed ter come back."

"You are sure he did not go away of his own accord—did not leave White Water quietly for some reason?"

"Sart'in'."

"You knew all his plans?"

"Yep."

"Have you found no clew to the cause of his sudden vanishing? Has he any enemy in this camp?"

"More'n one."

"Then I fear you are right—I fear he has been treacherously dealt with. I will speak to Frank and he will leave no stone unturned but he will solve the mystery—for me."

Again that queer look crossed Old Sunflower's face.

The baby still laughed an' crowed. It seemed to stretch out its arms to the ragged wanderer, and he timidly asked:

"May I jest tetch it, leetle woman? I'll be mighty easy."

"She came and laid it in his arms."

"Oh, great jehocus!" he spluttered, holding the child as if afraid of breaking it. "Oh, holy Jinks! I'll drop it! Good Lawd! I'm shore ter drop it!"

"Oh, no you will not," she assured, something like the shadow of a smile touching her face for an instant. "You need not be afraid of hurting it."

"Great gosh! hain't it a bouncer! An' it's so soft an' smooth like! Whoopee! jest looker them blue eyes! They're jest like yourn, leetle woman."

The baby clutched one hand upon the old fellow's ragged collar and with the soft fist of the other hand struck him fairly on the nose.

"Great hoppin' cats!" cried Old Sunflower. "Jest looker thet! Oh, he'll make a man as'll take keer o' hisself, bet yer socks! Thet's right, leetle shaver! bit him erg'in right in ther same place. Whoop! Give it to ther ole varmint, he deserves it! It's er derved wonder his hombly mug don't scare you ter death ur plum' inter fits, at least."

For half an hour the old man was amused and delighted by the pranks of the child. It was a singular thing that when its mother wanted to take it away it clung to Old Sunflower and plainly did not wish to leave him. The touch of the baby, the sounds of its queer crowing and gurgling filled the old fellow with a singular sensation of tenderness. Finally it fell asleep in his arms and he relinquished it to the mother.

"God bless ther leetle shaver!" he said, his voice sounding as soft as a woman's for a moment—"God bless him an' keep him! He has jest crep' clean down inter ther middle o' my ole heart. I hope thar may never ary bit o' harm come ter him ur you, leetle woman."

Ione thanked him, and a few minutes later he took his leave, promising to call again. Outside the cabin he capered and laughed like a boy.

"Makes me feel 'most as young ez I used ter wuz ter see er leetle teeny-tonty kid like thet. An' ter hoie it right in these yere ole arms—great jehocus! w'at er treat!"

That night Old Sunflower made his way into the saloon of the Columbia Hotel at an early hour. As he entered his attention was attracted by the sound of a loud voice that was saying:

"It is plain enough Violet Vane is a coward. If he had not been a sneak, he would have staid in White Water and faced me like a man. Instead of that, he sneaked out to escape my vengeance. He made a big spread when he struck this camp, but that was all it amounted to. He proved to be a common craven."

The tramp snarled out something that had the distinct flavor of an oath, and immediately pushed his way toward the point where the speaker stood.

"Who's ther rotten, low-down, measly, shiftless cur as durst make sech talk 'bout my leetle

side-pard?" he roared. "Let me git at him, an' I'll knock all ther crooks an' angles offen his figger! Whar is he?"

"Right here! Throw up your hands, you brawling ragamuffin, or I will bore you!" It was Denver Dave, and he held the drop!

CHAPTER XII.

STILL LIVING.

"Up with your hands!" repeated the gambler, sternly, as Old Sunflower faced him. "You will eat lead if you are not lively about it!"

"Up they goes then," and the tramp lifted them above his head. "Under ther present circumstances I'm boun' ter be mighty 'commodatin'."

"And it is well you are so. You will please be accommodating enough to swallow the words you uttered a moment ago."

"W'at words are ye referrin' ter?"

"Those you repeated about me."

"W'at wuz they?"

"You know what they were. Get down on your knees and ask my pardon."

"I'll be eternally blowed ter Hel-ena ef I will!"

"You will be blowed there if you do not."

"Oh, go smother yerself! I don't reckon you're shootin' fer ennythin' o' thet kind."

"Well, I just am."

"Ther boys'll hang ye up ter dry ef ye do."

"I will take my chances. Get down or eat lead!"

A comical look of despair settled on the vagabond's face.

"You don't really mean it, pard?" in a beseeching tone—"you can't mean it!"

"You bet your life I do!"

The tramp gazed beseechingly at the crowd, but no one seemed inclined to interfere.

"Hain't I got er frien' in this yere hull blamed town?" he whimpered.

"If you have, they will know better than to take a hand in this affair," said the man from Denver. "It would prove mighty unhealthy. This is a self-cocker I hold, and every time it spits out a chunk of lead something drops heavy. It is looking at you now, you loud-mouth ragamuffin, and it will lay you out in about thirteen seconds, if you do not go down on your knees and repeat a few words after me."

"By jehocus!" cried Old Sunflower. "Tell ye w'at I'll do—I'll fight ye fair an' squar' ef you'll giv me hafe er show."

"Do you think I would disgrace myself by fighting with such a creature as you? Well, I guess not!"

"Dern ye! ye dassent!"

"That is well enough for you to talk. You are hoping to catch me at a disadvantage. Get down!"

Sunflower appealed to the crowd.

"Are you galoots goin' ter see me knuckled like this ter this yere crook as don't amount ter shucks? Hain't none o' yer got ther sand ter stan' behin' er representative citizen o' yer dad-blamed ole town? Oh, great holy poker! Ef I wuz in ther town o' Red Hot, all I'd hev ter do's jest open my mouth an' let slide one leetle teeny-tonty yoop an' hafe ther people in ther place'd jump ter back me up. Good Lawd! how hev the mighty fallen!"

"And the 'mighty' will fall a mighty sight lower in about two shakes, if you do not get down on your marrow-bones. I am going to count five, and if you are not on your knees when I say the final number, I swear I will pull trigger. One!"

"Oh, come now!" protested the wearer of the sunflower. "This hain't no go. I thought you wuz ther critter as yooped fer fair play? Do you call this fair play? Ef you do, you are er derved sight bigger fool'n I took ye fer—an thet's sayin' er heap. I hain't goin' ter—"

"Two!"

"Say, hold on! I don't believe you know how ter count ez high's five. Don't keer er dern ef ye do! So long's I hev one single breathe in my ole body I'll never git down on my shins fer ary livin' mortal man, you hear me! I hain't built—"

"Three!"

"Praps you think you kin skeer me, but I want ye ter 'stinctly understan' thet. I'm ther bold man from Bad Bar, an' I'm in ther habit o' makin' up faces at ole death hisself. Now jest—"

"Four!"

"Wait—hole on! Don't ye say thet other figger! Ef ye do—Please don't say it! Oh, great smoke! Don't I wish I was dead an' buried! Kin I endoor sech disgrace? It will kerwhelm me with shame! I'll die fu'st! derned ef I will—"

"Five!"

Old Sunflower's courage suddenly deserted him. With a whoop of terror, he dropped on his knees, squawking:

"Hole on, pard—hole on! Don't shoot! I'm down!"

"And it is fortunate for you," declared the gambler, grimly. "I was on the verge of touching the trigger. In another second I should have fired, and your soul would have been on its way to Glory—or the other place."

"Waal, now I've taken a slump, w'at is it ye wants?"

"I want you to repeat after me what I say. Repeat it word for word, or I will drill you. Are you ready?"

"Let her slide. Don't keep me down hyer long. Some stranger might come in an' think I wuz prayin'!"

"All right, now begin. I am a miserable sneak and a coward. Repeat it."

With the graveness of a judge the old tramp said:

"You are er miser'ble sneak an' er coward. Repeat it."

For a moment Denver Dave was too astonished to speak, then an ugly light flashed from his eyes, and his face became like a black cloud.

"Look here," he snarled, "I am not fooling with you! If you think I am, just you repeat that trick. If you do, I'll be cursed if I do not scatter your brains! You will now repeat word for word what I say. Are you ready?"

"Let her drive."

"I am a miserable sneak and a coward."

Old Sunflower repeated it correctly.

"I humbly ask your pardon for anything offensive I have said about you."

The tramp repeated the words.

"You are a gentleman, and not a miserable, cowardly sneak like the dirty little runt who calls himself Violet Vane."

But, with a yell, Old Sunflower leaped to his feet.

"I kin stan' 'most any blamed thing thet is on merself," he shouted; "but I'll be blowed ef I will say thet 'bout my leetle pard! He's er white man as is too good ter wipe bis feet on sech er rotten varmint as you bel! Now, shoot, dad-burn ye!"

At this moment there was a commotion near the door, and a man mounted on a coal-black horse rode into the saloon. The horseman's face was concealed by a mask.

"Captain Mute!"

That was the name that passed from lip to lip. It was the mysterious Regulator chief!

Captain Mute's eyes ran swiftly over the faces of the assembled throng, as if he were looking for some one. It was a peculiar fact that more than one man crouched in his tracks, or turned away so his features could not be plainly seen.

Deliberately the chief of the Regulators drew a knife from its place of concealment. Then, with a swift motion, he hurled it at the wall, where it struck point first, and remained quivering, a sheet of paper fluttering from the haft.

With a bow and a wave of the hand, the man of mystery rode from the room, and disappeared in the darkness.

For a few moments no one had paid any attention to Denver Dave and Old Sunflower, and when Captain Mute had disappeared it was found the gambler from Denver had vanished also.

"Whoopee!" squealed the mountain vagabond, executing a wild dance of delight. "Ther o'ner white-livered critter didn't durst stay an' hev it out with me, even w'en he hed ther drop! He saw I hed riz right up on my ear, an' so he slid fer a safer section o' ther kentry. Oh, he's er p'izen sneak, an' don't ye fergit thet!"

But the interest of nearly every one centered on the sheet of paper that dangled from the haft of the knife Captain Mute had left in the wall. They crowded around it and found there was writing on the paper. One of the party read it aloud. It ran as follows:

"WARNING."

"In the town of White Water are several men who are known to be friends of the outlaw Black Burk and who constantly keep him informed of ev'rything that happens in the place. In disguise, Black Burk often visits this place and mingles freely with the citizens. The Regulators now give warning to those fellow, who are in sympathy with Burk to get out of White Water immediately, unless they have a burning desire to try the fit of a hemp necktie. The Regulators have taken an oath to wipe out Black Burk's gang of robbers, and they will keep it. If any remain in White Water after this, they will be liable to awake some morning and find themselves hanging from the limb of a tree."

"(Signed.)"

THE REGULATORS."

"Oh, driver!"

The stage-driver looked around in a startled manner, more than half-expecting Black Burk and his men to appear.

"Hold up a minute an' I'll be with ye."

The cry came from above, and the driver saw a man swinging himself down the almost unscalable side of the canyon. There was but one, and the Jehu did not fancy he could be thinking of robbing the coach, so he drew rein.

Several heads were thrust from the stage windows, and excited voices asked what the matter was. There was more than one exclamation of relief when they were assured the coach had not been held up by robbers.

In a few minutes the man reached the level of the stage-trail and came toward the coach. He was slightly below medium height, and his face was almost entirely concealed by bushy whiskers.

"Wal, w'at d'yer want?" growled the driver, as the stranger advanced.

"I want you to take a message to White Water for me," was the reply. "Will you do it?"

"For a consideration."

"That is all I ask. I will pay you well for your trouble. Here it is, and here is your pay."

He swung himself up and passed a strange-looking envelope to the driver, thrusting a coin into his hand at the same time. The envelope was made of crimson paper with the shadowy outlines of a skull and cross-bones drawn in black upon it. It was addressed to Frank Stillman.

"Take care that Stillman receives that," enjoined the bewhiskered man. "It is of the greatest importance."

"All right."

The stranger dropped to the ground and the coach rolled on again.

The driver performed his commission faithfully, for he placed the strange missive in the mayor's hands himself. Stillman looked at it curiously, then tore it open. He drew forth a crimson sheet of paper. His face blanched as he glanced at it, and he staggered back a step, uttering a hollow groan.

Upon the paper these words were written:

"I am still living. VIOLET VANE."

CHAPTER XIII.

HARRY TELLS SOME SECRETS.

SNAP SHOT JACK disappeared from White Water, for Horace Danton did not care to assume that disguise after the first day of his appearance in the pocket camp. Still he did not assume his true name. At the hotel he registered as Daniel Harmon, being assigned to the room with Charlie Ross, at the request of the stammerer.

Danton was inclined to keep well within the room by day, as if he feared an unpleasant meeting with some one, which was true. He was in White Water for a purpose, and it would ruin his plans, in all probability, if he were too bold.

But at night Horace Danton did not remain in the hotel. With Stuttering Charlie for a companion, he watched the cabin of the strange children. Both men were armed to the teeth and seemed ready for desperate work; but their night watches were fruitless at first. No one approached the little cabin which the waifs called their home.

Danton became nervous and excited.

"My God!" he cried. "This suspense is driving me mad! Why doesn't that miserable devil come? If only the children knew the truth, but it would not do to tell them. That would ruin all. He *must* come soon!"

After the second night of fruitless watching, Charlie resolved to see Harry again. For that purpose, he wandered out to their accustomed place of meeting.

But the cabin seemed strangely deserted. Harry did not appear as usual, and Charlie was beginning to wonder if the children were really there when he heard a light step behind him. He sprang up and turned quickly to find himself face to face with Harry.

As he arose before her, the girl uttered an exclamation of surprise not unmingled with fear, and started back.

"Why, hullo, Harry!" exclaimed Charlie. "I was watching fuf-fuf-for you."

She did not reply at once, and he saw there was a strange look on her pretty face—in her eyes was a light of fear.

"Why what's the mum-mum-mum-matter?" asked the stammerer. "You actually appear afraid of m-m-me."

"Oh, I did not know you were there!" replied

Harry, by way of saying something. "What made you come here? I do not want to see you!"

"Well, I'll be hanged!" Evidently Charlie was too astonished to stammer.

Harry turned very red and hung her head confusedly.

"Don't want to see mum-mum-me?" he echoed.

"What is the meaning of that?"

"Oh, I cannot explain! I must go to the cabin."

But he stepped into her path.

"Hold on, Harry. I must understand t-t-this."

She looked at him appealingly, then glanced round in a nervous manner as if to ascertain if they were observed.

"Please do not stop me, Mr. Ross!" she entreated.

"Mister Ross!" he cried, in amazement.

"If he should see me talking with you—"

"Who is 'he'?"

"Oh, I cannot tell—I dare not!"

"Harry, you ought to know I am your t-t-true friend," said Charlie, reproachfully.

She looked him square in the face, crying:

"I only wish I did know for sure!"

"I swear it!" he said, solemnly, meeting her gaze. "I would sacrifice my life to save you from harm!"

In her excitement she did not notice there was no sign of an impediment in his speech.

"I believe you!" she said, quickly. "But, oh, Charlie! we must not be seen here! I cannot stop to explain. I *must* go to the cabin!"

But he was not willing to have her depart without an explanation.

"Cannot you m-m-m-meet me somewhere where we will not be seen?" he asked.

She glanced round quickly, and then replied:

"Do you see those trees down there where the river plunges into the canyon?"

"Yes."

"Well, come there in an hour and I will meet you."

Then she darted past him and ran away toward the cottage. Charlie watched her till she disappeared, then he muttered:

"The rascal has tumbled."

An hour later the young man and the girl met beneath the shadow of the trees where they were not liable to be observed.

"N-n-n-now, Harry," said the stammerer, "you must explain what the meaning of this is. I d-d-don't understand it at all."

"Oh, Charlie! you must not ask me that!"

"Why not? Am I n-n-not your friend?"

"I suppose so."

"Well, why won't you trust me in this?"

"I promised not to tell."

"Oh-ho!"

He did not coax her; but suddenly she cried:

"I *must* tell—I *will* tell! It has been all I could do to keep it a secret. I have wanted to tell you lots of times, but did not dare. Now he says I must not speak to you. I could not make him believe you were my friend, but I am sure you are."

"You are right."

"It's my Uncle Mat," continued Harry, lowering her voice and drawing close to her companion. "He brought us here, and he has given us money and things since then. He is not our real uncle, but mamma wanted us to call him that. He has taken care of us since mamma died. He sometimes comes to see us nights, but yesterday he came in the day, and he told me you were one of our enemies."

"Well, he lied like bub-bub-bub-blazes!" spluttered Charlie.

"He said you were a friend of my father, who is bad, wicked man. He said you had been sent here to find us and carry us back to our father."

"What makes you think your fuf-fuf-father is a bad man?"

"Oh, he really and truly is! Mamma had to run away from him and keep in hiding till she was taken sick and died. Uncle Mat was so good to her, and he promised her he would take care of Dick and I. He has kept his promise well, though he does seem a bit cross to Dick at times and brother is afraid of him."

"What makes him visit you in the n-n-n-night? Why doesn't he see you in the daytime?"

"He did yesterday, but he was disguised. He says some of the men in this camp are his enemies, and he does not care to have trouble with them."

"Oh, t-t-that's it!"

"Yes. He is a queer man. Sometimes he will have lots and lots of money, then again he will not have a cent. But he is a real good man the most of the time. He says my father is a wicked villain."

Charlie coughed violently and rammed his cane into the ground in a savage manner.

"Why, look out! you will break it!" cried the girl. "What makes you do that?"

"I was thinking I wished it was a sword and the ground was your unc— Cuc-cuc-cuc-confound it all! what am I saying!"

Harry started back and gazed at him in horror.

"T-t-that was a slip of the tongue," he explained. "You know I can't control this dud-dud-dud-darned tongue of mine! It will make some bad breaks."

Harry could not repress a smile at this.

"That is so," she acknowledged.

"Do you know where your uncle is n-n-now?" asked the stammerer.

"No."

"Where does he stay days?"

"I do not know that."

"D-d-d-don't he tell you about himself?"

"Not very often."

"He's a queer k-k-kind of an uncle."

"But you know he is not our truly uncle."

"Well, he takes a pile of interest in you for a fellow who isn't a b-b-bit of relation. Does he t-t-tell you what your fuf-fuf-father will do with you if he fuf-fuf-finds you?"

"No; but we know father is a bad man, and we do not want him to find us."

"Do you remember your fuf-fuf-father?"

"Oh, yes, very well!"

"Did he sus-sus-seem to be a bad man, as you remember him?"

"No," she replied, slowly. "I remember him as very kind and gentle, but he was bad to mamma."

"How do you know that?"

"Oh, she told me he was, and Uncle Mat has told me so many times. That was why she ran away from him."

"Um!" grunted Charlie. "How is Dick?"

"Oh, I do not think he is any better. His cough is terrible, and the medicine does not seem to do it a bit of good."

"That's b-b-bad. You say your uncle gives you the medicine for him to t-t-t-take?"

"Yes."

"Is he a dud-dud-doctor?"

"No."

"Then how in t-t-thunder does he know what kind of medicine to give fuf-fuf-for a cough?"

That was a question Harry could not answer.

They talked for a considerable time longer, then the girl declared she must return to the cabin. Charlie took her hand before they parted, and gave it a pressure that brought a flush of warm blood to her face. As he watched her hurry away, he said, without the least faltering in his speech:

"The cursed black-hearted villain is about at the end of his rope! I hope he will get his just deserts."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE UNMASKING OF A DESPERATE VILLAIN.

WITHIN the room of the hotel, Charlie told Danton of all that had passed between himself and the girl. The sad-faced man listened eagerly, now and then giving vent to a muttered exclamation as the narrator related how the girl had expressed the firm belief that her father was a very wicked man. Strangely enough, Charlie did not stutter at all in telling the story, which revealed the fact that the impediment in his speech was assumed for a purpose.

"Charlie," cried Danton, when the story was finished, "you have done better than the best professional detectives. When you first wanted to take hold of the case I had no faith in you. Indeed, I had but little faith in any one—I had nearly lost hope. Nothing but failure had met me for years, and I had employed some of the best ferrets in the country—"

"Several of whom were unprincipled rascals."

"That is true, without doubt. I had spent the larger portion of a comfortable fortune in trying to learn the fate of my wife and children, and I was ready to take my own life in despair. By chance you learned of my case and offered your services. You were an amateur—a greenhorn. It is little wonder I had not confidence in you when so many professionals had failed."

"It is possible some of them failed in their minds."

"What do you mean?"

"I believe some of them truly struck the trail of your missing wife and children."

"Some of them—two at least—claimed they were hot on the scent."

"And then—?"

"And then they suddenly found they were mistaken."

Charlie laughed.

"Money did that," he declared. "You were paying them by the day. The longer they were in your employ the more they obtained. They actually did strike the trail of your enemy, your wife and your children. That I feel certain of. They ran them down. Then a large sum of money was placed in their hands if they would betray you. You were betrayed, and the rascally detectives still remained in your employ, eating up your money. There are any amount of such bogus officers in the business, and for that reason it has fallen into disrepute in a measure with those who know the tricks of the profession. As a rule, the average detective is not nearly so well paid as the public in general supposes, and a large sum of bribe-money easily tempts him from the straight path of honesty."

"I believe you are right. I know it is the best thing that ever happened to me that I trusted you. You have won your reward in a noble manner."

"You forget that Mat Rougal is not yet my prisoner."

"No, I do not forget. He soon shall be."

"You are right. We will lay for him till he is in our power. His crooked career shall come to a termination."

"It has been crooked, indeed! The man never forgave me because I would not shield him in his first crime and thus become an accessory. That was when we were scarcely more than boys and working in the same bank. In after years, when I was married, we met again. He seemed pleased to see me, and as he shook my hand warmly, he declared I had saved him from a life of crime. He seemed truly grateful, and I little dreamed the base treachery and thirst for revenge that still remained in his black heart. Oh, the miserable devil!"

For several moments he was silent, his emotions quite overcoming him. Finally, he went on once more:

"I introduced him to my family, and he became a frequent visitor at the house. He made much of little Harriet and Baby Dick. My wife liked him—liked him because he was my friend. I did not tell her of the past. Without my dreaming of the truth, the serpent began his work."

"How that man succeeded in poisoning my wife's mind against me without my becoming aware of it I do not know, but succeed he did. He worked silently even while he shook me warmly by the hand and smiled in my face. He led me on and on from little thing to little thing, step by step, till at last he succeeded in placing me before my wife's eyes in a position that seemed to prove my guilt. Still I was innocent. The wine I had swallowed had robbed me of my senses."

"When I became myself once more I found my wife and children gone. Jennie had left a note—a few hurriedly-written cruel words. She said she knew all—had seen what made her very soul revolt against me. I would never see her again, and, as she could not think of leaving her children, she had taken them with her. She would rather they would die than fall into my hands. She also intimated she had a true friend who would stand by her to the end."

"You cannot imagine my feelings—it would be an utter impossibility for me to describe them. I discovered Rougal had vanished—then I knew the truth. She had fled with him—he had worked my ruin. Not a doubt of this was left in my mind, for he had left a note behind saying he was revenged and sneering at me for my blindness. Then I became like a madman."

Once more Danton paused while he excitedly paced the floor of the little room, his hands clinched behind him and his face betraying the emotions which rocked his soul.

"I at once put detectives at work, giving them every clue possible," he went on. "At the same time I set about obtaining the evidence that would clear me in the eyes of my wife when she was restored to me. In this I succeeded, but I was destined never to look upon her face again. She is dead, and her death lies at the door of that black-hearted wretch! He basely deceived her—ruined her life and mine! But you have found my children, and, at least, I will have the comfort of their company in my old age."

"But Rougal, that infernal dastard!—never will I be satisfied till I know he has been fitly punished. He tried to end his work of vengeance by taking my life, but he failed. My turn comes next!"

There was an intensity of hatred about the man's words that made Charlie shiver. Danton had been bitterly wronged, and his very soul thirsted for vengeance.

"There is one thing of which you do not dream," declared the amateur detective.

"What is that?"

"Have you thought it possible Rougal is trying to put one of your children out of the way?"

Danton turned white, and with two strides reached Charlie's side, catching him by the shoulder.

"In God's name, what do you mean?" he gasped, hoarsely.

"I have told you of Dick's cough."

"Yes, yes!"

"It seems as if the child had consumption, if I can judge from what his sister says."

"Well?"

"This is a country to cure consumption in its first stages, but not to breed it."

"And you think—"

"Rougal is giving him bad medicine."

"Ha!"

"And I think that medicine is slowly carrying the boy off."

Danton staggered back.

"Great God!" he cried. "I believe you are right!"

"I feel sure I am. He wants the boy off his hands. Dick must be quite an incubance to him. With only Harry, he can more easily elude pursuit. Harry is pretty, and he means to keep her. For what purpose I cannot say—but I think I know."

Horace Danton trembled from head to feet.

"I must go to my children at once!" he cried. "I can stay away no longer! Do not ask me! That devil is poisoning my little Dick!"

"Now that would be the very worst thing you can do! Just keep quiet a few hours longer and we may have Rougal in our clutches; but if you go to the children now, he will take the alarm and we shall not be able to get our hands on him."

"But he is poisoning little Dick! Heavens alive! do you think I can remain quiet while that is going on?"

"Only for a short time longer. If we do not get our hands on our man to-night, I will consent to your seeing them and we will take Dick's 'medicine' from him."

But, it was a long time before Charlie could succeed in convincing the excited father that was the best course to pursue.

In the early part of that evening Danton entered the saloon of the Columbia. Already was Charlie, with several trusty companions, including Old Sunflower and Red Hot, watching the cabin of the waifs.

Denver Dave was in the saloon, and, as usual, he had a large crowd around him, while he was freely expressing his mind in a loud tone of voice.

"I am more than half-inclined to believe these so-called Regulators are in with Black Burk and his gang," he declared.

"What makes you think so?" asked a listener.

"Well, I have my reasons," nodded the gambler; "and good reasons they are too. They are wooling this camp in great shape."

"Now looker hyer, man," said Judge Whittles pressing his way forward and confronting Dave. "It will not be healthy to insinuate any thing erg'in' this yere camp as ye can't back up. I reckon we are ez sharp as most people as comes from Denver, b'gosh!"

"That's all right," laughed the black-whiskered man, waving one hand in a careless gesture. "They are playing a mighty shrewd game, and would be liable to deceive anybody."

"Then how is it you hev sech a blamed heap of wisdom that you tumble ter it?"

Dave scowled a bit.

"Oh, I manage to catch on to a great many things. I have no absolute proof I am right, but still I am pretty certain I am."

"Waal," drawled the judge, "if ye hain't got no absolute proof, I 'low ye'd best shet up."

"You are an old man," said Dave, slowly; "but if you were not, I would make you swallow those words."

"Why didn't you make Violet Vane swallow his words when he called you a cheat?" cried some one on the outside of the circle.

The man from Denver wheeled toward the speaker.

"If the man who made that remark will step in here I will agree to knock the angles off his shape," he said.

No one stirred.

"I thought so," sneered the gambler. "A coward, as was the fellow who called himself Violet Vane. Where is the little sport in velvet now?"

"He is here!"

The circle parted at one side, and Violet Vane himself strode forward and confronted the boaster from Denver!

Dave staggered as if struck in the face, turning white as a sheet, as he gasped:

"Gods! the dead alive!"

"Not by considerable," said Vane, calmly. "I have never been dead yet, to my knowledge."

"But I saw you—I saw you fall into the water. It swept you down to—"

"Ah-a!" shouted the little sport, in amazement. "It was *you* who fired that dastardly shot! I thought it was another. But, the bullet did not touch me. The rail broke beneath my weight and I fell into the water. By good fortune, my clothes caught on a jagged point of the rock which supports the bridge, and I was saved from being carried down to death. Now I am here. And now—*you have it!*"

With a single stride forward, he sent out his right fist, the hard knuckles striking Dave fairly between the eyes and knocking him down.

In some way the man's beard caught in the button on Violet Vane's coat-sleeve, and when Dave fell the whiskers were jerked from his face.

They were false!

As the gambler struggled to his feet, Horace Danton cried:

"Great heavens—*Mat Rougal!*"

But another name fell in a shout of astonishment from the lips of the many spectators:

"*Black Burk!*"

CHAPTER XV.

"THE VENGEANCE OF VIOLET VANE!"

THE amazement of every one was so great that the crafty desperado was enabled to make a break for liberty before a hand was raised to detain him.

Straight toward the crowd between himself and the door leaped the unmasked villain, giving utterance to a savage yell. Involuntarily the men fell back before that wild figure that now brandished a glittering knife in his right hand. Once or twice he struck, and the bright blade was dimmed by a dark stain. Then he broke through the circle.

"Stop him! Stop him!"

Horace Danton blocked the doorway, a revolver in his hand.

"Stop, Mat Rougal!" he shouted, lifting the weapon. "Halt, or I fire!"

The desperado snarled out an oath and hurled his knife at the man he had so bitterly wronged. Fortunately, he missed his aim. With a side-long leap he reached the window. The next moment there was a crash of breaking glass as he leaped through it, carrying away sash and all.

Several bullets followed him out into the darkness, but he was untouched. When the men rushed forth from the saloon to search for him, he had disappeared. A sharp hunt was instantly inaugurated, but it was useless. The man had vanished as if the earth had opened and swallowed him.

And Violet Vane was also missing. No one remembered seeing him after the unmasked desperado leaped through the window.

Among the man-hunters Horace Danton was the most eager and excited. He had fired at Rougal as the villain crashed through the window, but it seemed as if Satan guarded his own. Danton was loth to give up the search as useless, but he was compelled to do so.

After quiet had been restored, he crept down toward the cabin of the waifs, where he knew Charlie Ross and his companions were on the watch. They had heard the shots and cries, and when he told them what had occurred there was excitement, indeed.

Old Sunflower was the most excited of any one.

"Did ye say my leetle pard Sweet Violets wur thar, an' knocked ther critter down?" he whispered, hoarsely. "Oh, holy Christopher! Then thet leetle cuss hain't dead a tall! Oh, squint-eyes Betsey! Oh, great Jehocus! Oh, howlin' hallelujah! Git out o' ther way an' let me kick a hoel in ther darkness! Somebody throw me down an' putt a board over my mouth afore I yoop right out loud in meetin'! Oh, Smotherin' Moses!"

It was with the greatest difficulty the old fellow restrained the exuberance of his spirits enough to keep from arousing the echoes of the pocket with several yells that would have put a locomotive whistle to blush.

After a time the party settled down to watch and wait once more. It was a tiresome task, and before long the miner Red Hot was sound asleep, stretched on his back with his arms outspread; but when he began to snore, they were forced to arouse him.

"Dern it, man!" whispered Old Sunflower. "Do ye want ter start an avvy-lanche thet'll come down ther mountain thar an' burry us? Jest let up on thet attempt ter mock er thunder-storm, an' see ef ye can't keep yerself awake."

It was past midnight when the watchers saw two dark forms creeping cautiously toward the cabin.

"Thar they be!" whispered Red Hot, excitedly.

"Are you awake?" asked Old Sunflower, cautiously. "It's er derned wonder ye be."

"All ready, men," came in a guarded tone from Charlie Ross. "Remember my instructions. Lay low till I give the signal."

Slowly and silently the two figures approached the cabin. It was too dark for the watchers to make out their forms distinctly, but their aspect proclaimed they were on evil work intent. Once or twice they halted and gazed round in a searching manner, but Charlie Ross and his companions hugged the ground closely, remaining undetected.

The two men advanced to the cabin door and rapped in a peculiar manner.

"That is the signal which Mat Rougal gives when he visits Harry and Dick," whispered Charlie.

Before long the door was opened cautiously, then the two men hurled themselves against it and burst into the cabin. There were several smothered shrieks of terror, then Charlie said in a low, firm tone:

"All ready, boys! Now to work! Follow me!"

Straight for the cabin he dashed. At the door one of the men suddenly shot open the slide of a dark-lantern, and threw the light into the room, revealing four figures.

The boy and girl were struggling in the grasp of the two ruffians, Humpy Dick and Stub Smith!

"This is not just the game we were looking for," cried Charlie; "but we will make it fast just the same. Gaffle on to them, boys!"

But, the squat desperadoes objected to the "gaffling" process. Releasing the children, they made a desperate break for liberty. Old Sunflower seized one and Red Hot grasped the other.

"Hole on hyer, don't be in sech an all-fired rush!" cried the sunflower tramp. "We want ter see ye a bit."

"That's er fac'," agreed Red Hot. "We're a s'prise party roun' givin' away presents. We've got er beaucherful pair o' neckties fer you two critters."

"Curse you!" snarled Humpy Dick, snatching out a knife and lifting it above his head. "Take that!"

But, the blade did not touch the red-headed miner. With a lightning-like movement, Charlie Ross caught the fellow's wrist and wrenched the weapon from his hand. Then the deformed wretch was thrown to the floor and securely bound with cords brought for that purpose.

Meantime the others had secured Stub Smith in a similar manner.

"Waal," drawled the sunflower tramp, "we've caught game anyhow, ef 'tain't jest w'at we wuz lookin' fer."

Horace Danton came to Charlie's side.

"We must tell them the truth now," he said, his voice unsteady with emotion. "It would be useless to conceal anything further. Rougal will not fall into our trap after this."

"I believe these men are his tools, sent here to do work of his planning," the amateur detective replied. "I think it will not do any good to keep the truth from Harry and Dick, but I think you had better let me tell them. When they fully understand it, you can come forward."

Danton consented to this, and Charlie approached Harry, who was trying to quiet her almost hysterical brother. Half an hour later the children knew the truth.

The crimson letter containing the declaration that Violet Vane still lived dealt a terrible blow to Frank Stillman. Not that he had thought the man dead, but he had begun to entertain the hope that Vane had left White Water for good and given up his plan for vengeance. There was that about the letter which told him the Velvet Sport still remained in the vicinity and still held to his hatred for the man who had won the affections of the woman he had loved.

"If he harms her—" he hissed. "But he will not; he will strike at me. Well, I do not fear him. I can defend myself; but let him keep his hands off my wife and child. If he touches either, I will have the last drop of his heart's blood!"

On the night of the unmasking of Black Burk

in the saloon of the Columbia Hotel he was away from home and did not return till quite late. As soon as possible, he hurried home. As he approached the cabin, he noticed how dark and deserted it seemed and a chill struck to his heart as he thought of the home-coming when he had found his wife unconscious on the floor with that slip of paper in her hands.

Hurrying to the cabin, he opened the door. It yielded readily under his hand. A feeling of horror seized upon him, for when he was away in the evening his wife was in the habit of keeping the door fastened and only opening it when she was sure her husband asked admittance.

The moment he entered a peculiar odor struck his nostrils. He lighted a match, and a cry of horror came from his lips as he saw the sight revealed.

The baby's crib was empty, and in the easy chair beside it reclined his wife, with a chloroform-saturated handkerchief over her mouth and nostrils. Pinned upon her breast was a sheet of crimson paper, on which were written these words:

"I leave you your wife; but I take your child. This is the vengeance of Violet Vane!"

CHAPTER XVI.

DOOMED TO DIE.

FRANK STILLMAN was nearly driven mad by the terrible discovery he had made. He tore the paper into fragments and then rushed around the room, raving like one who had lost his reason. Suddenly he dashed out into the night with the desperate intention of following the kidnappers of the child. But the darkness brought him to his senses, and he stood outside the door trembling in every limb as if shaken by a chill.

"Oh, my G-d!"

The words came from his lips in a despairing groan, then he staggered back into the house, having remembered his wife. He snatched the handkerchief from her face and made desperate efforts to arouse her. She was white as the dead, and for some time he was tempted to believe she was dead, indeed.

"If that devil has killed her—Great God!—if he has, I will yet find him and inflict on him the tortures of the damned! No quick and easy death shall be his!"

But, Ione was not dead. However, it was a long time before she became conscious, and then it was nearly an hour before she could tell what had happened. Even then she was so hysterical that she could only make it plain she had been overpowered by several masked men. She knew nothing of the crimson sheet of paper that had been left on her breast, and Frank was careful not to tell her about it.

At first she could not consent to his leaving her for a moment, but when he made her understand it was for the baby's sake and that he would not be long gone, she consented.

But little could be done that night. The kidnappers, without doubt, were miles away amid the mountains, and it would be impossible to follow them in the darkness. But would it not be quite as impossible when daylight came? The thought was maddening.

The indignation of the citizens was aroused to the highest pitch by the outrage, and when Frank learned that Violet Vane had boldly appeared in White Water that very evening, his fury was boundless.

"I did not think the man was such a dastard!" he cried. "Hanging is a thousand times too good for him!"

It was well Old Sunflower was not present to hear those words, for he would have defended his "leetle pard" at any cost. When the old tramp heard, some hours later, what had happened, he stoutly declared Violet Vane had no hand in the black work.

The story of the attempted kidnapping of Harry and Dick was soon given the circulation of the camp, and the two pieces of black work aroused the indignation of the miners to a terrible pitch. Stub Smith and Humpy Dick stood in great danger of being unceremoniously lynched. Indeed, that would have been their fate but for the appearance of Captain Mute and some of his Regulators.

Leaving his men to guard the two ruffians, the Regulator chief held a brief consultation with Judge Whittles and some of the most influential men of the camp, during which he laid before them the outlines of a scheme for entrapping Black Burk and his gang. The men were all trusty, and having pledged them to secrecy, he took his departure.

Till daylight several of the Regulators stood

guard over the prisoners, but it was more to protect them from being lynched than to keep them from escaping. With the break of day the Regulators disappeared, leaving the unlucky desperadoes to the care of the citizens of White Water.

But Black Burk had been at work during the night. In the morning the following notice was found posted in a conspicuous place:

"TAKE NOTICE.

"I have dallied with the people of White Water too long; now I mean business. I was unjustly driven from the camp in the first place, and having found I cannot rule the place, I have resolved to run it. There is but one way it can avoid my fury. If Stub Smith and Humpy Dick are hanged, I will wipe White Water from existence! If they are released and allowed to depart from the pocket, I will withhold my wrath indefinitely. This is no vain threat, as you will find to your sorrow if you do not release the two men whom you hold prisoners. I have the power to carry my word into execution."

"Yours lovingly, BLACK BURK."

This was like a fire-brand to the already aroused flame of indignation.

"Shell we knuckle down ter thet measly critter?" howled Red Hot, his fiery hair standing out all over his head like porcupine-quills. "Ef we do, we'd orter climb up a tree somewhere an' pull the tree up by ther roots. Now is ther time ter show our patriotism! This is ther day of our redemption!"

"Amen, so mote it be!" nodded Old Sunflower, solemnly. "I 'lowed I saw blood on ther moon las' night. It's boun' ter run in rivers afore menny more hours."

"Waugh!" grunted Red Hot. "You must hev seen outer yer ears! Thar wuzn't er derned peep of er moon las' night."

"How in thunder do you know thet? You wuz asleep an' snorin' ther bigger part o' ther time."

"It wuz ther smell of your breath thet putt me ter sleep. It's wuss'n chloroform."

"Derned ef I'd say a word ef I wuz in your place! I've bin gittin' up a fuddle offen your breath fer ther las' hour. I hain't taken er drink fer two days, but by jehocus! I'm blowed ef I kin walk straight now!"

Two hours later the tramp and the red-headed miner were wandering around, locked arm in arm, hilariously "elevated."

The people of White Water did very little labor that day. At an early hour, Frank Stillman got together a party of men and left the pocket on a sort of blind hunt for his kidnapped child.

Meantime, Horace Danton and Charlie Ross had been doing what they could to reconcile Harry and Dick to the change affairs had taken. Very naturally, the children shrunk from their father at first for they had been taught to believe him a very bad man; but after hours of tiresome talk and explanations, they began to look on him more favorably. But it was a difficult thing indeed for Harry to believe her uncle was nothing but a common robber and desperado—a man on whose head there was a price.

"He was so kind to me," she murmured again and again.

"You did not understand his kindness, Harry," declared Charlie, who had abandoned his stammering speech.

"Did not understand it? What do you mean?"

They were alone together; Horace Danton was talking with little Dick.

"Harry," and the young man took her hands and looked into her eyes till they fell before his admiring gaze, "you are a beautiful girl."

"There, there, Charlie!" she protested; but he continued:

"This man Rougal is in truth no relative of yours, but I fancy he has an eye for beauty."

The girl became crimson and stammered some unintelligible words.

"Perhaps he meant to make you his wife when you became older," Charlie suggested.

"Oh, no, no!"

"But you have told me he was kinder to you than to your brother."

"Ye-es."

"I am almost certain he had some such a design, and while I despise the man as a villain, I can not help admiring his good taste."

The girl was silent with her head bowed and her golden curls hiding her blushing face. His arm stole round her waist and he drew her closer.

"Harry!" he whispered.

Still she was silent, but he felt her trembling in his arms.

"Harry, I love you!"

Something like an electric thrill ran over her body, but still her lips were sealed.

"In aiding your father to find you," he continued, speaking softly, "I have lost my heart. I love you, and I hope by and by to make you my own dear little wife. Will you make me happy by becoming my wife, little sunshine?"

She made an attempt to speak, but failed. He lifted her blushing face and kissed her fairly on the lips. With a cry of dismay, she broke from him and ran out of the cabin. He followed, and found her crying and laughing at the same time.

"Oh, Charlie!" she exclaimed; "how funny it would have been if you had stuttered when you said that!"

"What mum-mum-mum-makes you think sus-sus-so?"

When he continued to urge for her reply, she said, in a frank manner that was charming:

"I like you, Charlie, oh, I can't tell how much! It is more than I ever liked any one before, except my mother—and it is different from that. I am sure it must be love. You may ask papa about it."

And so Charlie was made happy.

The amateur detective was on hand at the trial of the two would-be kidnappers, which began at two o'clock in the afternoon, Judge Whittles sitting on the case. Charlie conducted the prosecution, while an impecunious lawyer defended the prisoners. Nearly the entire inhabitants of the town were present.

The trial was conducted in the original style peculiar to such affairs in some of the new mining-camps of the wild regions of Colorado, and would have proved highly amusing to a spectator who was used to seeing such things carried out in the proper manner.

Some difficulty was found in selecting a jury, for as fast as any one was mentioned the lawyer for the defense objected to them on the ground that they were prejudiced. At length the judge became exhausted, and roared:

"Thar, that will do! If you keep on objectin' thar won't be any jury, fer I will 'low ther hull town's prejudiced. If you open your mouth to objec' ag'in, I'll add a load of lead to ther cargo of law you think you hev in your fool head!" And, with a heavy thump, he laid a revolver on the box in front of him.

No further objections were raised, and things went on swimmingly.

One of the witnesses for the prosecution proved to be in a pitiable state of intoxication, a fact that was not discovered till he was called on to tell his story. It was the miner Red Hot.

"Whash'd I shew?" he repeated, when he was questioned. "I shaw—I shaw feller wearin' shunflower in hish bussionhole. He grashped ther gal an' tries ter kerry her off, but he wash *drunk*—yesh, shir, he wash *drunk*. I grabbed him by ther collarsh an' flopped him onter hish back, an'—"

"Great Jehocus!" roared Old Sunflower, rising. "I objec' ter this yere piece o' evvydence! Blamed ef ther red-headed individual hain't bin drinkin'! It's too bad, but his evvydence w'u'dn't 'a' bin much good, anyway, fer he wuz asleep most o' ther time last night."

Red Hot was led from the room to cool off, and the trial proceeded. It occupied nearly three hours, and then, without leaving the room, the jury rendered a verdict of "guilty in the first degree." Then the judge arose and solemnly pronounced sentence of death on the unfortunate ruffians! He concluded by stating the hanging would occur two hours after sunset.

No sign of the Regulators had been seen in White Water during the day, but, suddenly, two or three of them appeared and took charge of the prisoners. Then active preparations were made for the hanging.

The tree upon which the two victims of Regulator justice had met their fate was selected as a gallows and a huge heap of wood and brush was piled near it, showing the citizens intended to have the light of a bonfire. But beneath all the preparations there was a purpose not apparent to the casual observer. It was expected Black Burk would attempt to rescue the doomed ruffians, and arrangements were quietly made for his reception.

The hour for the execution arrived, and with it Frank Stillman and his companions returned to White Water, unsuccessful and disheartened. The bonfire was started; the prisoners were led out. As they stood beneath the tree with the ropes around their necks, Old Sunflower dashed up, yelling:

"Hyee comes Black Burk an his bellyons ker-whoopin'! Whoopee! Git reddy ter guv 'em chain-shot an' canister!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE WIPE-OUT.

THE vagabond spoke the truth—Black Burk and his men were coming. But they were expected, and in a moment the men of White Water were running for the shelter of the darkness, weapons in hand.

With yells like a pack of wild animals, the robbers charged through the town and into the light of the big fire. They were firing right and left, and evidently thought they had frightened the citizens nearly out of their wits by the way they ran.

But they were destined to meet with a great surprise.

As they dashed through the circle of firelight, some of the citizens opened fire on them and two saddles were emptied. Then Stub Smith and Humpy Dick were caught up by their comrades, and the entire band plunged into the darkness again.

The clatter of hoofs and a rousing cheer came from down the street.

"The Regulators—they are coming!" cried one of the road-agents.

"Let them come," laughed Black Burk. "When they get here, we will be gone. To the bridge."

Then came the shock that filled them with terror and dismay.

The bridge was gone!

"Trapped!" shouted half a score of voices. From back in the town came a wild yell that chilled the blood of the insuared bandits.

The bridge had been cut away for that very purpose! There was now but one way of escaping from the pocket, and that passage was guarded by the hated Regulators.

"A million curses!" snarled Black Burk. "We must cut our way out of here! Fight like devils, for you know your fate if you fall prisoners in their hands! Come on!"

Wheeling his horse, he led them back at a mad charge. Where the light of the bonfire exposed them a volley was poured into them that sent down men and horses. But they kept on till met by the Regulators.

Then ensued a brief but savage battle. The tricked outlaws were forced to wheel and fly once more.

But, whence could they fly?

"Whoop-ee!" squealed the sunflower tramp. "They're routed, ther hull durned gang! Come on, pards, an' see 'em jump ther river."

In truth some of the unfortunate wretches had conceived the desperate resolve of making an attempt to cross the stream in some manner. That seemed their only hope, for they surely could not break through the ranks of the Regulators.

Captain Mute led a portion of his men in close pursuit of the doomed outlaws. The unfortunate wretches took their chances by springing into the stream; but men and horses were swept away into the blackness of the night—down, down upon the jagged rocks of death!

Even the triumphant shout of the sunflower tramp was silenced as the last doomed wretch was carried into the darkness by the seething water, his yell of defiance and hatred sounding like the wailing cry of a lost soul.

"By jehocus!" muttered Old Sunflower. "That's ther last o' them! They're gone, man an' critter. Never a blamed one will come out o' ther water alive."

"You are right," grimly agreed Judge Orson Whittles. "Ther wipe-out is complete, an' ther hull thing wuz ther plannin' of Captain Mute."

On his black horse close at hand sat the Regulator chief, staring straight into the darkness where the last of the outlaws had vanished. Silent and grim he remained. If he heard the words of those around him, he made no sign. For five minutes he remained thus, then by a touch of the rein, he whirled his black horse and galloped away.

Among the others, Frank Stillman had fought savagely. The excitement and relentlessness of the struggle seemed to relieve his feelings in a measure. But, when it was all over, he staggered away, sick at heart.

"Oh Go!" he groaned. "To have met with such maddening ill-luck! It will kill Ione! Poor, poor girl! She must be nearly dead now! The terror of being alone while such a terrible fight was taking place may have quite overcome her. And when I return without our baby—our little Frank—that will quite crush the life out of her body."

When he came in sight of his cottage home he saw there was a light in the window; but in-

stead of cheering him, it almost seemed as if the bright rays struck like a knife to his heart.

"She is watching for me," he groaned—"watching and hoping! And when I return with my arms empty, all her hope will be crushed to earth. Heaven above! how can I face my poor wife!"

His courage quite deserted him for a time and he stood outside the cabin, dreading to enter. At length he rapped on the door. Ione's voice demanded who was there.

"It is Frank," he replied, but his voice was so hoarse and unnatural that he was startled.

The door was quickly opened and he stepped in. The eyes of husband and wife met.

"Frank!" she gasped.

He held out his empty arms. Words could not have expressed so much. She swayed and put out her hands blindly. He caught her and carried her to the easy-chair.

"Tell me all about your search," she said, faintly, after a time.

There was not much to tell, but he was a long time telling a little.

Suddenly there was the sound of a horse's hoofs at the door, then another sound that brought husband and wife to their feet as if electrified.

An infant's wail!

The door swung open and Captain Mute stepped in. In his arms he carried the kidnapped child!

With a shriek of joy, the mother flew to the mysterious chief of the Regulators and caught her baby in her arms, covering its face with kisses.

With two strides, Stillman was at the side of the masked man and had caught him by the arm.

"Where did you find it?" he cried.

"In the hands of Black Burk!" was the reply.

"He was the wretch who stole your child."

Frank recoiled in amazement.

"You—you must be mistaken!" he gasped.

"It was Violet Vane. It was thus he sought to be revenged upon me."

"It is *you* who are mistaken," replied the Regulator, firmly. "I know Violet Vane had no hand in this work."

"But he left a note saying he had taken our child, which was his vengeance."

"The note lied. It was all the work of Black Burk."

"How do you know this? You seem certain."

"I am."

"Whom have we to thank for the restoration of our little one? Will you not reveal your face?"

The Regulator lifted his hand and removed the sable mask. With a cry of amazement, Frank Stillman reeled backward.

"You!" he gasped, hoarsely—"you!"

"Philip!" shrieked Ione.

"Captain Mute," the Regulator, was Violet Vane himself!

"Yes, I," said Vane, calmly. "I have destroyed your most bitter enemy and restored your child to your arms. *This is my vengeance! Farewell!*"

With a wave of his hand, he sprang out through the open doorway and disappeared in the darkness. A moment later the hoofbeats of a horse sounded through the night, becoming fainter and fainter till they died out in the distance.

As Judge Whittles had said, the wipe-out was complete. The relentless water and jagged rocks finished the work of extermination, and never again was White Water City troubled by Black Burk and his desperado band.

And thus Horace Danton's bitter enemy met a tragic death. Harry and Dick soon came to know and love their father for the noble and kind-hearted parent he truly was. When little Dick ceased to take Rougal's "medicine" his cough began to become less troublesome, and in time he grew to be a strong and healthy lad. Harry finally married "the real Charlie Ross," and he made her a devoted husband. But he did not turn out to be a great detective; he went into a very different business. He said he was afraid he would spoil the record he had made on his first case.

With the destruction of the road-agents there ceased to be necessity for the Regulators in White Water, and the organization was known no more. To many the identity of Captain Mute remained a mystery.

Violet Vane left White Water on the night of the wipe-out, never to return. Old Sunflower soon followed his example.

THE END.

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- 534 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Death Hunt.
- 539 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Texas.
- 544 Deadwood Dick, Jr., the Wild West Vindicator.
- 549 Deadwood Dick, Jr., on His Mettle.
- 554 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Gotham.
- 561 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Boston.
- 567 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Philadelphia.
- 572 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Chicago.
- 578 Deadwood Dick, Jr., Aloft.
- 584 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Denver.
- 590 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Decree.
- 595 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Beelzebub's Basin.
- 600 Deadwood Dick, Jr., at Coney Island.
- 606 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Leadville Lay.
- 612 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Detroit.
- 618 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Cincinnati.
- 624 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Nevada.
- 630 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in No Man's Land.
- 636 Deadwood Dick, Jr., After the Queer.
- 642 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Buffalo.
- 648 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Chase Across the Continent.
- 654 Deadwood Dick, Jr., Among the Smugglers.
- 660 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Insurance Case.
- 666 Deadwood Dick, Jr., Back in the Mines.
- 672 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Durango; or, "Gathered In."
- 678 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Discovery; or, Found a Fortune.
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- 690 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Dollars.
- 695 Deadwood Dick, Jr., at Danger Divide.
- 700 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Drop.
- 704 Deadwood Dick, Jr., at Jack-Pot.
- 710 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in San Francisco.
- 716 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Still Hunt.
- 722 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Dominoes.

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- 84 Idyl, the Girl Miner; or, Rosebud Rob on Hand.
- 88 Photograph Phil; or, Rosebud Rob's Reappearance.
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- 121 Cinnamon Chip, the Girl Sport.
- 125 Bonanza Bill, Miner.
- 133 Boss Bob, the King of Bootblacks.
- 141 Solid Sam, the Boy Road-Agent.
- 145 Captain Ferret, the New York Detective.
- 161 New York Nell, the Boy-Girl Detective.
- 177 Nobby Nick of Nevada; or, The Sierras Scamps.
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- 209 Fritz, the Bound-Boy Detective.
- 213 Fritz to the Front; or, The Ventriloquist Hunter.
- 226 Snoozer, the Boy Sharp; or, The Arab Detective.
- 236 Apollo Bill, the Trail Tornado.
- 240 Cyclone Kit, the Young Gladiator.
- 244 Sierra Sam, the Frontier Ferret.
- 248 Sierra Sam's Secret; or, The Bloody Footprints.
- 253 Sierra Sam's Pard; or, The Angel of Big Vista.
- 258 Sierra Sam's Seven; or, The Stolen Bride.
- 273 Jumbo Joe, the Boy Patrol; or, The Rival Heirs.
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- 281 Denver Doll's Victory.
- 285 Denver Doll's Decoy; or, Little Bill's Bonanza.
- 291 Turk the Boy Ferret.
- 296 Denver Doll's Drift; or, The Road Queen.
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- 330 Little Quick-Shot; or, The Dead Face of Daggersville.
- 334 Kangaroo Kit; or, The Mysterious Miner.
- 339 Kangaroo Kit's Racket.
- 343 Manhattan Mike, the Bowery Blood.
- 358 First-Class Fred, the Gent from Gopher.
- 368 Yreka Jim, the Gold-Gatherer; or, The Life Lottery.
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- 385 Yreka Jim's Joker; or, The Rivals of Red Nose.
- 389 Bicycle Ben; or, The Lion of Lightning Lode.
- 394 Yreka Jim of Yuba Dam.
- 400 Wrinkles, the Night-Watch Detective.
- 416 High Hat Harry, the Base Ball Detective.
- 426 Sam Slabside, the Beggar-Boy Detective.
- 434 Jim Beak and Pal, Private Detectives.
- 438 Santa Fe Sam, the Slasher.
- 443 Sealskin Sam, the Sparkler.

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- 269 The Gold Ship; or, Merle, the Condemned.
- 276 Merle Monte's Cruise; or, "The Gold Ship" Chase.
- 280 Merle Monte's Fate; or, Pearl, the Pirate's Bride.
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- 287 Billy Blue-Eyes, the Boy Rover of the Rio Grande.
- 304 The Dead Shot Dandy; or, Benito, the Boy Bugler.
- 308 Keno Kit; or, Dead Shot Dandy's Double.
- 314 The Mysterious Marauder; or, The Boy Bugler's Trail.
- 377 Bonod, the Boy Rover; or, The Flagless Schooner.
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- 387 Warpath Will, the Boy Phantom.
- 393 Seawolf, the Boy Lieutenant.
- 402 Isidor, the Young Conspirator; or, The Fatal League.
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- 412 The Wild Yachtsman; or, The War-Cloud's Cruise.
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- 468 Neptune Ned, the Boy Conster.
- 474 Flora; or, Wizard Will's Vagabond Pard.
- 483 Ferrets Aloft; or, Wizard Will's Last Case.
- 487 Nevada Ned, the Revolver Ranger.
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- 507 The Hunted Midshipman.
- 511 The Outlawed Middy.
- 520 Buckskin Bill, the Comanche Shadow.
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- 530 The Buckskin Bowers.
- 535 The Buckskin Rovers.
- 540 Captain Ku-Klux, the Marauder of the Rio.
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- 565 Kent Kingdom, the Card King.
- 570 Camille, the Card Queen.
- 575 The Surgeon-Scout Detective.
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- 597 The Young Texan Detective.
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- 607 The Rover Detective; or, Keno Kit's Champions.
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- 644 The Hercules Highwayman.
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- 656 Butterfly Billy's Man Hunt.
- 662 Butterfly Billy's Bonanza.
- 668 The Buccaneer Midshipman.
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- 686 Orlando, the Ocean Free Flag; or, The Tarnished Name.
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- 697 The Scarlet Sabre; or, The Sharp from Texas.
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- 707 The Red Sembrero Rangers; or, Redfern's Last Trail.

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- 8 Kansas King; or, The Red Right Hand.
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BY CHARLES MORRIS.

- 118 Will Somers, the Boy Detective.
- 123 Phil Hardy, the Boss Boy.
- 126 Pioneyne Pete; or, Nicodemus, the Dog Detective.
- 130 Detective Dick; or, The Hero in Rags.
- 142 Handsome Harry, the Bootblack Detective.
- 447 Will Wildfire, the Thoroughbred.
- 152 Black Bess, Will Wildfire's Racer.
- 157 Mike Merry, the Harbor Police Boy.
- 162 Will Wildfire in the Woods.
- 165 Billy Baggage, the Railroad Boy.
- 170 A Trump Card; or, Will Wildfire Wins and Loses.
- 174 Bob Rockett; or, Mysteries of New York.
- 179 Bob Rockett, the Bank Runner.
- 183 The Hidden Hand; or, Will Wildfire's Revenge.
- 187 Fred Halyard, the Life Boat Boy; or, The Smugglers.
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- 196 Shadowed; or, Bob Rockett's Fight for Life.
- 206 Dark Paul, the Tiger King.
- 212 Dashing Dave, the Dandy Detective.
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- 235 Shadow Sam, the Messenger Boy.
- 242 The Two "Bloods"; or, Shanandoah Bill and His Gang.
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- 305 Dashaway, of Dakota; or, A Western Lad in Quaker City.
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- 341 Tony Thorne, the Vagabond Detective.
- 353 The Reporter Detective; or, Fred Flyer's Blizzard.
- 367 Wide-Awake Joe; or, A Boy of the Times.
- 379 Larry, the Leveler; or, The Bloods of the Boulevard.
- 403 Firefly Jack, the River-Rat Detective.
- 423 The Lost Finger; or, The Entrapped Cashier.
- 428 Fred Flyer, the Reporter Detective.
- 432 Invincible Logan, the Pinkerton Ferret.
- 456 Billy Brick, the Jolly Vagabond.
- 466 Wide-Awake Jerry, Detective; or, Entombed Alive.
- 479 Detective Dodge; or, The Mystery of Frank Hearty.
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- 501 Boots, the Boy Fireman; or, Too Sharp for the Sharper.
- 566 The Secret Service Boy Detective.
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- 360 Silver-Mask, the Man of Mystery.
- 369 Shasta, the Gold King; or, For Seven Years Dead.
- 420 The Detective's Apprentice; or, A Boy Without a Name.
- 424 Clibuta John; or, Red-Hot Times at Ante Bar.
- 439 Sandy Sam, the Street Scout.
- 467 Disco Dan, the Daisy Dude.
- 490 Broadway Billy, the Bootblack Bravo.
- 506 Redlight Ralph, the Prince of the Road.
- 514 Broadway Billy's Boodle.
- 524 The Engineer Detective.
- 536 Broadway Billy's "Dimkilty."
- 548 Mart, the Night Express Detective.
- 557 Broadway Billy's Death Racket.
- 571 Air-Line Luke, the Young Engineer.
- 579 The Chimney Spy; or, Broadway Billy's Surprise-Party.
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- 605 William O' Broadway; or, The Boy Detective's Big Inning.
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- 628 Broadway Billy's Dead Act.
- 640 Bareback Beth, the Centaur of the Circle.
- 647 Typeviter Tilly, the Merchant's Ward.
- 659 Moonlight Morgan, the "Fizest" Man of Ante Bar.
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- 687 Broadway Billy in Clover.
- 696 Broadway Billy in Texas.
- 703 Broadway Billy's Brand.
- 711 Broadway Billy at Santa Fe.

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- 23 Nick o' the Night; or, The Boy Spy of '76.
- 37 The Hidden Lodge; or, The Little Hunter.
- 47 Nightingale Nat; or, The Forest Captains.
- 64 Dandy Jack; or, The Outlaws of the Oregon Trail.
- 82 Kit Harefoot, the Wood-Hawk.
- 94 Midnight Jack; or, The Boy Trapper.
- 106 Old Frosty, the Guide; or, The White Queen.
- 123 Klown Charley, the White Mustang.
- 139 Judge Lynch, Jr.; or, The Boy Vigilante.
- 155 Gold Trigger, the Sport; or, The Girl Avenger.
- 169 Tornado Tom; or, Injun Jack From Red Core.
- 188 Ned Temple, the Border Boy.
- 198 Arkansaw; or, The Queen of Fate's Revenge.
- 207 Navajo Nick, the Boy Gold Hunter.
- 215 Captain Bullet; or, Little Tomknot's Crusade.
- 231 Plucky Phil; or, Rosa, the Red Jezebel.
- 241 Bill Bravo; or, The Rovers of the Rockies.
- 255 Captain Apollo, the King-Pin of Bowie.
- 267 The Buckskin Detective.
- 279 Old Winch; or, The Buckskin Desperadoes.
- 294 Dynamite Dan; or, The Bowie Blade of Gochetopa.
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- 326 The Ten Pard; or, The Terror of Take-Notice.
- 336 Big Benson; or, The Queen of the Lasso.
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- 386 Captain Cutlass; or, The Buccaneer's Girl Foe.
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- 418 Felix Fox, the Boy Spotter.
- 425 Texas Trump, the Border Rattler.
- 436 Phil Flash, the New York Fox.
- 445 The City Vampire; or, Red Rolfe's Pigeon.
- 461 One Against Fifty; or, The Last Man of Keno Bar.
- 470 The Boy Shadow; or, Felix Fox's Hunt.
- 477 The Excelsior Sport; or, The Washington Spotter.
- 499 Single Sight, the One-Eyed Sport.
- 502 Branded Ben, the Night Ferret.
- 512 Dodger Dick, the Wharf-Spy Detective.
- 521 Dodger Dick's Best Dodge.
- 528 Fox and Falcon, the Bowery Shadows.
- 538 Dodger Dick, the Dock Ferret.
- 543 Dodger Dick's Double; or, The Rival Boy Detectives.
- 553 Dodger Dick's Desperate Case.
- 563 Dodger Dick, the Boy Vindicator.
- 573 The Two Shadows.
- 582 Dodger Dick's Drop.
- 594 Little Lon, the Street-Singer Detective.
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- 626 The Champion Pard.
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